

All My Loving

YAOI NOVEL



written by Mariko Hihara
translation: Rieko Shimizu

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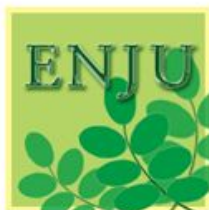
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Cover illustration: Yuki Amane

Translation: Rieko Shimizu

Published by ENJUGROUP

enjugroup@gmail.com

<http://enjugroup.wix.com/enjugroup>

This book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning

This book is a boys' love story (Yaoi) and contains a depiction of a romantic relationship between two men. It is intended for adult readers only.

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Chapter 1

Most of the spring snow from beginning of the week had melted away, save for the small heaps of ice that were shoveled up against the fences.

Evening came, and with it, a stronger breeze from the nearby mountain, making the temperature chilly despite the sunny weather. Kento Yamashiro gathered the collar of his black varsity jacket closer. His long brown hair was tied behind his head, and it prickled at the nape of his neck. Underneath his jacket was his usual casual outfit of a T-shirt and chinos.

“Maybe I should go back to the dorm to get a scarf.”

As he crossed the deserted soccer field towards the school gates, Kento felt a twinge of regret. He drew his bold, smartly-angled eyebrows together, and directed his large, almond-shaped eyes at the unmelted snow that remained in the shade. He pulled his angular chin inwards.

Although his face still carried remnants of boyishness, over this past year his high cheekbones, straight nose, and the shape of his face had grown considerably more mature-looking.

“In Tokyo, all the snow is gone already. Count on Hachioji to be cold, still,” he muttered half to himself and half to the boy in front of him, who looked toasty in a down jacket. He knew the boy wouldn’t hear his complaint, but still.

Shonan Private School was located here in Hachioji, about an hour by train from Tokyo and a bus ride further into a forested area.

Tomoya Komatsu, who had been walking ahead of him, gave a little leap. Strands of his cropped, chestnut hair fell into his face, and he brushed it away as he turned around with wide eyes.

His face, in contrast to Kento’s, was round and still very much boyish.

“Kento, let’s run! Managing Director Mori is here himself to pick us up!” he shouted energetically, waving his hand at Kento behind him.

“Oh, okay.” Kento looked up from adjusting his backpack at Tomoya’s surprised face, then the direction in which he was pointing. In the guest parking lot outside the school gates was a Jaguar painted British racing green.

“Hey, you’re right.” It wasn’t the usual white Corolla that belonged to Manager Shimoda. This car belonged to the managing director of their production agency, the corporate bigwig, if you will.

“Coming!” Kento hastened his steps as Tomoya’s slight figure

broke into a run.

Nobuyuki Mori smiled mildly at the two boys running towards him. He got out of the car and opened the back door.

"There's no rush," he said gently, as the two boys tumbled into the car breathless, like a pair of puppies.

Although Mori was a managing director, he was still only twenty-eight. He felt more like an older brother to these two boys in tenth grade. "Shimoda went to Haneda Airport to pick up Nishimura and Oka, so I came to fetch you instead," he explained as he got back into the driver's seat.

"Oh, yeah! The older guys were gone in Osaka for background research, right? Gee, I'm so jealous," Tomoya said enviously as he twisted to take off his bag. Nishimura and Oka were the two other members of their pop idol group, Chronos.

True to Tomoya's nickname, Oka and Nishimura were indeed "older guys": Oka, the leader, was twenty years old, while Nishimura was nineteen. They were both out of school. The younger group still had classes to attend, which meant they were left out of the very enticing field trip to an amusement park in Osaka.

"Do you think they'll bring back souvenirs for us, Kento?"

"Dunno," Kento said noncommittally while helping to pull Tomoya's bag off. Mori's eyes smiled at them in the rearview mirror as he set the car in motion.

"We're headed for East Metropolitan TV, right, Mr. Mori? About forty minutes from here if we get on the Hachioji interchange?" Tomoya's tone remained friendly and frank even towards a corporate bigwig like Mori.

"Let's see, well, it might be a little congested around Takaido, but since we'll be getting off at Hatsudai instead of Gaien, I suppose it would take around that much time."

Kento listened to their conversation while he pulled out a script from his backpack. They were filming for a music show today with a long talk segment. He wanted to read it over one more time.

"Oh yeah, this your first time on M Map, isn't it, Kento?" Tomoya exclaimed. "Just to let you know, the talk segment isn't going to follow the script at all, so there's really no point in reading it."

"Really?"

Tomoya was a year younger than him, but he was a senior in terms of their career, having debuted nine months before. Kento had been late in joining the group due to certain reasons.

"Will you teach me how to prepare, then?" He lowered his head humbly. Tomoya proudly began to explain.

Music Map, otherwise known as "M Map", was a show that introduced the top billboard hits. It also marketed itself on its talk

segments with the guests that they invited to each episode. Of course, Kento was already aware of that. The MCs consisted of Matsukawa, a famous pop singer back in the day when pop was still “new music”, and Tawara, a popular stand-up comedian.

Matsukawa was notorious for being difficult to deal with, and Kento had read the script over many times last night in order not to mess up his talk segment.

“It’s actually all up to Mr. Matsukawa’s mood at the time.”

Kento looked dubiously at Tomoya. Tomoya chuckled and gave Kento’s shoulder a light clap.

“Don’t worry! We’ll have a run-through before we go on air. Take notes on your script then. It was like that the last time we went on the show. And you know, Mr. Matsukawa isn’t as scary as you think.”

When they arrived at the Kojimachi studio of East Metropolitan TV, Oka and Nishimura were already waiting in the green room. The oldest member, Oka, was slight with a small frame. His dyed brown hair was parted down the middle. Nishimura was the tallest and the most sturdily-built. His short hair was spiked with mousse. They were both wearing jeans with matching T-shirts in different colours with T-Rexes printed across the front.

“Been waiting for you,” Oka grinned and waved.

“Do you have souvenirs for us?” Tomoya said as he walked inside, then froze. Kento walked in after him and tensed up as he realized that the MCs, Matsukawa and Tawara, were also present.

Tawara was a comical man, his reptilian appearance somewhat resembling a kappa. He was wearing a black sweater and jeans with a red pen tucked behind his ear. He had his nose buried in the script and occasionally scribbled something in it with the pen. When he finished, he tucked the pen behind his ear again, making him look like a seedy guy at a horse wager.

As for Matsukawa, he wore a pair of sunglasses perched on his bald forehead. His black jacket had an embroidered dragon and tiger sprawled across the back. He had every appearance of a yakuza gangster. Kento balked at the can of beer in his hand.

Tawara suddenly gave him a wide, clown-like grin, the corners of his mouth turning up exaggeratedly.

“Kento Yamashiro, we’ll be focusing the conversation on you today, as the belated member of Chronos. Got it?”

“Um ? alright.”

A hesitant Kento was ushered by Tomoya into a metal folding chair beside the two.

“I heard from the leader that you couldn’t join the group at first

because of a leg injury?"

"Um, yes."

Matsukawa took a swig of beer before fixing Kento with a glare.

"Don't you have any special tricks, something like that? Makes a visual impression on the audience that way, you know what I mean?"

As Kento sat frozen by intimidation, Oka the leader swooped in to rescue him.

"He's the best dancer, actually," he said. "He can do ten backflips in a row. Oh, and the moonwalk."

"But you already do that at concerts, right? We want something new for the show, you know. Something no one's ever seen before."

Tomoya nudged Kento. "What about that?"

"What?"

"The guitar. You can play, right, Kento?"

Oka's eyes widened in surprise. "That's news to me, too."

"Yes, that's what I'm talking about," Matsukawa joined in.

"Something even the members don't know about. Your dirty little secret." He roared with laughter before ordering the staff to bring a guitar.

"So? What can you play? If you say 'Forbidden Games' I'll have to punch you in the face."

Kento was handed a guitar. He began to tune the strings.

"The Beatles," he replied.

"The Beatles? I'm quite picky about them, you know. If you do a horrible job of playing them, you won't come out of this alive."

The set for Music Map was designed to look like a recording studio. A keyboard and drum set were placed in the background, and a glass-panelled mixing booth was set off to the side.

Matsukawa and Tawara sat at each end of the narrow, kidney-bean-shaped table, and the four members sat between them. Three cameras and sound-gathering microphones were placed on standby in their standard positions.

"You're almost on." The assistant director snatched the can of beer from Matsukawa's hands.

Tawara laughed. "You'll only have to part with it for a while," he said as he waved a hand in Matsukawa's scowling face.

The "on air" light came on.

"And?action!"

"Good evening everyone, our Most Valuable Guests for tonight are the rising stars of pop music: Chronos!"

The cameras glided over the studio floor.

"?I see, Kento, so your debut was a little late because of a condition in your leg?" Tawara directed the topic to Kento, just as they had rehearsed. Oka seamlessly picked up the cue and pointed at

Kento.

“He was practicing the guitar for the whole time.”

Kento reached out to grab the guitar placed beside him.

“You were planning to show off all along, then,” Tawara quipped.

“Let’s see you play a number,” Matsukawa said. “But if it’s ‘Forbidden Games’, I’ll have to punch you in the face.”

Kento held his guitar in position and looked steadily at Matsukawa’s face.

“This is a song that I want to dedicate to the person I love most. ‘All My Loving.’”

It was different from what they’d rehearsed, but Matsukawa looked unperturbed as he nodded. Kento took it as a green light and began to sing along to his guitar.

Doctor, you’re my dearest. You said that with time I would forget about you. But no number of years is going to change how I feel. Ever. Yuri Orihara.

That was the name of Kento’s beloved. Kento had met him a year and a half ago. He only had to turn over the hourglass in his heart for the sands of time to take him to the past.

To the days they had spent together.

Chapter 2

“Kento, if your knee is hurting, you should take a break from lessons.”

Kento was sitting on his bed peeling a cold compress off of his knee when a chestnut-coloured bob jumped into view. Kento looked up to see his roommate, Tomoya Komatsu. His large chestnut eyes were watching him worriedly.

“You’re already an amazing dancer, Kento. One day off isn’t going to do anything to you. Don’t worry about the new bits of the routine ? I’ll teach you when I get home.”

“I’m fine!” Kento snapped.

Tomoya was considerate and kind, but they were still rivals. Besides, although they were in the same grade, Tomoya was still a year younger than him. Kento was too proud to allow himself to learn dance routines from a junior.

Kento shoveled up his overgrown hair and began tearing off the cold compresses with vigour.

“Have you thought about wearing a knee support?” Tomoya suggested hesitantly.

“I won’t. If I do, it would make people think even more that I’m injured or something,” Kento said shortly, unrolling the legs of his chinos and picking his backpack off the floor. “Let’s go. The bus is coming.”

“Oh, you’re right!” Tomoya checked the time on his G-Shock watch and leapt up. “The bus only runs every half-hour during the day here. I’ll go ahead!”

Kento watched the boy burst out of the room before slowly slinging his backpack over his shoulders. Then, he broke into a walk, trying not to put too much weight on his right leg.

For the past month or so, the pain in his right leg had been bothering him.

“Damnit, during such an important time, too...”

Kento was part of an entertainment agency called Sion Promotion. At sixteen, he was still talent-in-training. Today, he was only one of many background dancers for a senior duo called DZ.

Last week, Manager Shimoda had summoned everyone and announced that the agency was planning to debut a new four-member group six months down the road. The members would be selected out of this group through an audition.

That was why, right now, every lesson counted.

Since last night, Kento had kept cold compresses on his knee and had rested, which was probably why the pain had subsided a little. He

breathed a sigh of relief.

He exited the room and walked down the long hallway to the entrance.

The dormitory was large-scale, housing two people per room and up to two hundred people in total. Each room was about forty-five square metres, with private bathrooms, showers, and toilets. A long row of twenty-five rooms flanked each side of the narrow hallway in the two-storey building. Kento shared a room at the end of the first floor, which meant he had a considerable way to walk to the entrance.

"I should hurry." Kento glanced at his watch and broke into a run.

Eventually he met a man walking his way, wearing a suit and carrying a large black bag.

The man was about five-foot-seven, not very different in height from Kento. But his slender figure was noticeable even with his suit.

"Who could he be?"

The rules were rigidly enforced in this dormitory, and even family members could not enter without permission. It was only natural, the dorm head had told him: after all, they were in charge of students from all over the country. Meetings with parents were supposed to be held in the meeting room located in the wing between the school and the dorms. The recreation room and dining hall were also located there.

The man was wearing a fashionable brown suit. He certainly did not look like a repairman.

"Who're you?" Kento eyed the approaching man suspiciously. The man widened his eyes in surprise and touched the frame of his glasses with a finger.

"Are you a student here? Don't worry, I'm not anyone to be suspicious of." The man smiled as he ran his fingers through his wavy hair, which was parted down the middle. From afar, he had looked like a mature man in his suit, but his smiling face was open and innocent, and his eyes, though sharp, were not cold. His eyebrows were thin and his chin delicate. Kento thought he looked pretty, like the actresses he often saw at the dance studio.

I wonder if he's someone's older brother.

"Where are you going?" Kento asked.

"I'm on my way to the infirmary."

The answer made Kento even more suspicious. He glared at the man.

"The infirmary's not inside the dorm."

"Yeah, but if I'm coming from the back gates, the dorm is a shortcut. You'd agree, right? Anyway, excuse me."

The man was right; the infirmary was conveniently located between the school and the dorm as to be accessible if any dorm

resident fell ill. If this man had frequent business with the infirmary, Kento decided he probably wasn't a suspicious character. He let his gaze slip away from the man's back as he dashed for the entrance.

Shonan Private School was a combined junior and senior high school offering a total of six years of education. The senior high school division was further divided into General, Athletic, and Performing Arts streams. Although it wasn't officially affiliated to N. University, N. University admitted students from Shonan with a faculty reference. For that reason, many students at Shonan had ties to the entertainment business, and athletic students were also scouted from all over the country. About a quarter of them lived in dorms.

Kento had transferred here in the second term of ninth grade. Now, two months in so far, he had had no time to enjoy student life, and still had no friends. But he and his roommate, Tomoya Komatsu, naturally began to spend time together since they were part of the same entertainment agency.

Today, they had left class early together to go to dance lessons. Kento and the other background dancers were up to their eyeballs in dance lessons since DZ's nationwide tour was about to begin.

Tomoya was already at the bus stop, waiting for him.

"Hurry, hurry!" he urged Kento when he appeared at the school gates. The bus arrived just then, and they both boarded.

"Thank goodness," Tomoya said.

"Yeah. Good thing we made it."

"No, I meant thank goodness you're part of the group now." Tomoya sank into a seat and chuckled. "You know, I never liked leaving class early by myself. It stands out. I wasn't bullied about it or anything, though," he added. "It's just that... when you say you're in the entertainment business, people are a little more critical of you."

"But there are tons of people here who are in the entertainment business," Kento said.

Tomoya wrinkled his brow in disagreement.

"There are a lot in senior high school, but not that many in junior high."

"...I see."

Kento wasn't quite as riled up about it. He was very much used to not fitting in. He had always stood out in class, being a year older than the rest of his classmates since elementary school, due to certain reasons.

"Anyway, enough about that." Tomoya took out a pack of gum from his pocket and passed a stick to Kento. He chewed on one himself as he picked up where he left off.

“Who do you think will make the audition?”

“We won’t know until it’s over,” Kento said unconcernedly. Tomoya stared up at him.

“You’re lucky, Kento, you’ll probably make it. Mr. Mori scouted you himself.”

Tomoya was talking about Nobuyuki Mori, the managing director and son of the female president of the production company.

Kento’s mother owned a small boutique on Omotesando, a high-end shopping district, and Kento often hung out there after class. Nobuyuki Mori had stepped into the boutique one day, accompanying a female personality affiliated with the company. That was when the two had met. Mori had sweet-talked Kento’s mother into letting him scout Kento for Sion Promotion.

“That doesn’t matter. An audition is still an audition,” Kento said as he chewed his gum. “Anyway, look at you. Your whole family is involved in music. And you’re a good singer.”

Tomoya wrinkled his nose and shook his head.

“But it’s classical music. That doesn’t count.”

Tomoya’s father was a professor at a college of music. His mother was a piano teacher, and his two older sisters were in vocal programs at music school. They were a family of born and bred musicians.

“I hate classical music. It’s not catchy, and it’s boring.”

Kento figured it must sound that way if you had to listen to it every day.

“Your family is way cooler,” Tomoya said. “Your dad’s a photographer and your mom’s a fashion designer. You’re like a TV-show family,” Tomoya said enviously.

“I guess it is if you put it that way, but in reality it’s pretty different.”

His father, Ikuto, was indeed a photographer; however, his subjects were rather dull ? archeological remains or things related to anthropology or other specialized academic fields. He often submitted work for a famous science journal published by the American Geographic Society.

His mother, Hisae, designed textiles ? the dyeing and patterning of fabric. She played a more backstage role in terms of fashion. But she was now a sought-after designer, currently working in London for an up-and-coming designer. Their family currently lived apart, with each following their dreams.

The headquarters of Sion Promotion, where they were both affiliated, was located in Shinjuku.

A year ago it had transferred out of a rented office in the Aoyama

building into one of the high-rises at the south exit of the station. The agency used to rent a dance studio in Shimokitazawa, but now had its own studio in the new office for dance lessons. Members of the agency were now free to come at any time to practice.

The dance studio, at a spacious 150 square metres, was like a gymnasium. A part of the wall had a mirror and a barre. DZ's concert tour was planned for the winter holidays, in addition to out-of-town concerts on weekends starting in December. That meant lessons were becoming steadily tougher.

A professional dance team formed the core of the troupe of background dancers. Kento and his junior team had to dance to eight songs, including the opening and finale.

As he danced along with Uehara, the choreographer, he felt the sweat begin to stream down in droplets.

The exhilaration was indescribable. The lessened pain in his leg only spurred him on; Kento let his boundless energy flow to the tips of his hands and feet as he went through the routine.

"Looking good, Kento," Uehara said, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Kento, stop stealing the spotlight," grumbled Ryusuke Kawara, one half of the DZ duo, in a joking way as he popped in from the doorway. "You need to tone down your dancing, or else you're going to outshine us both."

Mori, who was beside him, smiled behind his glasses and gestured for Uehara to lean in and listen.

"I think the results are in," he murmured into Uehara's ear, which of course went unheard for Kento.

"Right. Along with him, I'd vote for Nishimura and Oka as potentials."

"I was just thinking the same thing."

Chapter 3

Kento's fervent practicing over the weekend came back to bite him in the butt on Monday.

His knee had been aching since morning, and he had no appetite.

"Normal size, please," he ordered in a feeble voice, instead of the extra-large he normally ordered. The woman over the kitchen counter looked at him wide-eyed.

"Kenny, what's gotten into you?" she said.

"I had a snack earlier," Kento lied. Tomoya was right behind him, and Kento did not want the boy to worry.

However, his smaller portion at breakfast came back to haunt him during Physical Education in third period. Now, in addition to the pain in his leg, his hunger was sapping the energy out of him.

They were practicing on the vaults in Physical Education today, and to make things worse, they were practicing a particularly difficult move called the handstand vault. Students had to do a handstand on the vault, somersault in the air, and land on the other side.

Physical Education was a strong subject for Kento, but he was definitely not in his best condition right now. His right knee bothered him and prevented him from concentrating.

He, along with the rest of the students, jumped the vault in order and went back to the end of the line after their turn. They had gone through the routine a number of times before the accident happened.

When Kento stepped onto the springboard with his good foot, the familiar pain shot through his knee. He regained his balance, but barely, and did a handstand on the vault. The moment he sprung off and landed on the mat, the pain shot through his leg again ? but this time, it was his left leg.

"Agh!" The pain made him curl up on the spot.

"What's wrong?" The PE teacher came running up to him.

"I think I sprained my left foot."

"It's rare to see you trip up, Yamashiro," said the teacher, touching Kento's right foot. "You should go to the infirmary. Can you walk on your own?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

Truth be told, his right knee also hurt, but it wasn't so bad that he had to humiliate himself and lean on someone's shoulder. Tomoya was giving him a concerned look, so Kento flashed a peace-sign at him to show him he was alright. Kento dragged his foot as he lurched into a walk.

It was like a textbook case of bad luck. First it was his right leg;

now his left foot was hurt.

“This sucks,” he muttered as he left the gymnasium. He went outside and walked along the edge of the schoolyard instead going into the school, mindful of the classes still going on. The infirmary was located in a separate wing at the end of the long main building.

When Kento rolled open the glass door, he was met with the stinging smell of disinfectant. Although he had come here several times to get cold compresses for the unbearable pain in his right knee, he could never come to like this smell. The school nurse, Kazue Fujimoto, was a kind, plump woman in her fifties. Although she was nice, Kento did not want to become a regular visitor to this room if he could help it. But today, he couldn’t afford to be picky.

“Mrs. Fujimoto,” Kento called as he stepped inside.

A corner of the quiet room was partitioned off with a curtain, and there was a presence behind it. When he drew closer, he heard a deep man’s voice.

“Just bear with me a bit... it’ll prick a little. There, all done. You can open your hand.”

The curtain was drawn, revealing a man in a white lab coat. There was someone lying on the bed, hooked up to an IV bag that was hanging from a metal stand resembling a coat rack. The man in the lab coat adjusted the speed of the infusion.

“It’ll be over in about two hours, so take a nap until then,” he said to the boy in the bed. He then closed the curtain and turned to look this way.

“Hey?you’re...”

It was the man Kento had met in the hallway of his dorm last week. The lab coat made him look different, but there was no mistaking his slim stature and gentle face.

The man also noticed Kento. “Hi there, what’s the matter? Coming down with a fever?” he said, his eyes smiling at him from behind his glasses.

“No. I kind of sprained my foot,” Kento mumbled. The man’s eyes turned worried.

“I’ll have a look. Have a seat on that chair.”

“Where’s Mrs. Fujimoto?” Kento stared warily at the man’s face.

“Mrs. Fujimoto isn’t here right now. Would you rather not have me instead?”

“That’s not what I meant. I wanted to ask who you are.”

The man, still smiling, ushered Kento onto a round stool in front of his desk.

“I’m the school doctor, or rather, a substitute. My name is Yuri Orihara.”

“School doctor?”

Kento tilted his head in perplexity over a phrase he wasn't used to hearing. He sat down on the round stool as Orihara patiently explained to him.

"The school doctor does medical checkups and administers vaccines to you and your fellow students. You remember having checkups every April at school, don't you?"

Now that he thought about it, he did. He remembered back in primary school, he was always getting some kind of vaccine or medical checkup. He vaguely remembered a certain Dr. Someone in a lab coat consulting him, though he hadn't realized that this person was the school doctor.

Was there one in junior high school?

Kento still kept his head cocked as he replied, "Yeah."

Orihara smiled wryly at his half-hearted response.

"Well, we only see you students once in a while, anyway. I guess it can't be helped if you don't know about us."

He was right. It was impossible to remember the school doctor if you only saw him once or twice a year.

"So, what's a school doctor like you doing here?"

"Mrs. Fujimoto asked me to make a house call to a student who was in bed with a fever," Orihara explained as he crouched down on his knee in front of Kento. "Is this the leg that hurts? I saw you trying not to put weight on it."

Orihara touched his right foot as he spoke. Kento shook his head vehemently.

"No. It's the other one."

Orihara took off Kento's sneaker and touched his left foot with his slender fingers.

"Can you try moving your big toe?"

Then, he supported Kento's ankle as he carefully rotated each toe.

"There's no swelling, so your ligaments and bones should be alright." Orihara took poultice from the medicine shelf, applied it from the heel to the ankle, and wound an elastic bandage around it.

The sliding door opened with a rattle, and a portly middle-aged woman appeared.

"Oh, Doctor, I'll handle that."

Fujimoto, the school nurse, was back.

"You again, is it?" she said with a smile when she saw Kento's face, but her tone of voice changed when her eyes fell on his bandaged left foot. "Have you hurt your other leg, too?"

At her words, Orihara furrowed his brow and adjusted his glasses.

"So he has hurt his right leg, hasn't he?" he said to Fujimoto.

"That's right. Lately he's been coming here all the time to get poultice from me."

Kento shook his head as insistently as he could. He hadn't wanted word to get out about his right leg in the first place. There was no way he was going to see a doctor about it.

"It's nothing. There's nothing wrong with it."

Orihara nevertheless directed a sharp gaze at Kento's right leg. He ran his fingers searchingly along it. He held the knee and lifted the heel with his other hand.

"Does it hurt?"

"No."

Orihara carefully studied the front of the shin just below the knee.

"Does it happen to hurt around here, by any chance? Especially when you put weight on it?"

The pair of piercing eyes right beside him looked at him steadily, as if they could see through everything. Kento reluctantly nodded.

"Yeah. How can you tell?"

Orihara rested his chin on his fist and lapsed into thought.

"I don't think I got your name," he said as his face softened.

"Kento Yamashiro."

"And how old are you?"

"Sixteen."

Orihara turned to Fujimoto beside him, who was listening in with a worried look. "Do you know how much he's grown in the past year?" he asked her.

Fujimoto extracted some documents from the cabinet and looked for Kento's personal record. She let out an exclamation of dismay.

"He just transferred here in September, so we don't have any of his former records."

Orihara turned back to Kento. "Do you know how much you've grown in this past year?"

"Not really... but I did get a lot taller. Maybe about fifteen centimetres more."

Orihara's eyes widened in surprise, but pointed at Kento's large sneakers and let out a sound of amazement.

"You probably did grow quite a bit, didn't you? You have pretty large feet, and you're almost as tall as me."

Orihara crouched down again and applied another poultice on Kento's right knee. He wound a support around it, then spoke to Kento in a grave tone.

"Kento, I think you should get an X-ray taken of your right knee. Since there's no X-ray machine in this infirmary, would you be able to come to the clinic I work at tomorrow instead?"

"Clinic?"

"Dr. Orihara works at Miyashita Clinic, right in front of the back gates of the school," Fujimoto jumped in to explain. "Dr. Miyashita is

actually the school doctor, but Dr. Orihara is his nephew and he's filling in for him."

Kento was a little overwhelmed by the bombardment of information, but one thing he did understand was that he needed to get an X-ray taken and examined.

He was suddenly overcome with anxiety.

"Am I seriously hurt?" he asked Orihara in a trembling voice.

"No. We're just going to take an image just in case. Could you come by with one of your parents tomorrow?"

Kento bowed his head, unsure of what to do. "Neither of them are in Japan. That's why I'm living in a dormitory."

"Oh, dear. What shall we do?" Fujimoto said worriedly.

"Do you have any sort of guardian?"

As soon as Orihara said those words, a boyish voice spoke up behind them, making everyone turn around.

"What about the manager of the agency?"

The sliding door stood open, and Tomoya was poking his head in.

"Remember whenever we'd get sick at concerts out of town, the manager would take us to the hospital with our health insurance cards?"

"Manager?" Orihara turned his body to face Tomoya.

"We're part of an agency called Sion Promotion."

Orihara nodded, looking convinced. "Ah, so you boys are entertainment personalities, then. Part of what they call the entertainers' club? Alright, then in that case, I'm expecting to see you tomorrow with your manager."

Fujimoto patted her voluptuous chest with firm resolution. "I'll phone the manager."

After watching Orihara leave the infirmary, Tomoya immediately pounced on Fujimoto.

"Mrs. Fujimoto, who was that?" he asked. "He's really handsome. And he looks nice."

"Really? I thought he was normal," Kento said indifferently. "Besides, what's up with him, anyway? He said there was something wrong with my leg. He gets on my nerves!"

Fujimoto patted Kento's shoulder with an air of exasperation.

"Dr. Orihara is just concerned about you."

"Is that his name? Dr. Orihara? So if he's a doctor, he must be really smart!" Tomoya gushed excitedly to Fujimoto.

"He's the school doctor, dear."

"But he's not Dr. Miyashita. That's who usually comes." Tomoya at least appeared to know about Miyashita, since he had been at Shonan since seventh grade. "Is he a new school doctor? So he's replacing Dr. Miyashita?"

A school doctor was more or less just a doctor who came to school on a part-time basis as necessary. Most of the time, schools asked doctors at a nearby practices to be their school doctors, like a side job to their regular practice. The school had asked Miyashita to take the position since his practice was right in front of the back gates of the school. Shonan Private School also had a dormitory full of students to take care of.

“He hasn’t replaced Dr. Miyashita. He’s a substitute.” Fujimoto told the same story to Tomoya which she had just told Kento.

Orihara was Miyashita’s nephew. Recently, Miyashita had been hospitalized due to an injury to his cervical spine. At the hospital he was also found to be suffering complications from diabetes, and was forced to extend his stay. Since he could not simply close his clinic during that time, in a last-minute effort he had summoned Orihara from his post at a university hospital to act as his substitute.

“He’s also taken over as our school doctor while he’s at it.”

Now that he knew that a university hospital doctor like Orihara had told him he needed to undergo a thorough examination, Kento was at once seized with uncertainty.

Don’t tell me I’m actually seriously ill? With bone cancer, or something like that?

Kento had had to put weight on his right leg in order to protect his freshly-injured left leg, which meant by the time Kento crawled into bed, the pain had gotten utterly unbearable.

What if I have to amputate my leg? There was no stopping his imagination now. Tomoya noticed Kento’s ashen colour and propped himself up in his bed across.

“What’s wrong?” he said. “Does your leg hurt?”

“No.” Kento maintained his bravado and pulled the covers over his head. In the dark, he gritted his teeth against the pain and clenched a fistful of his sheets.

Mom.

He called the name of the person he wanted most by his side. He felt a stinging at the back of his nose. He rubbed his nose against his pillow to distract himself from the pain. He could not let the tears spill. Not at any cost, even if no one was looking.

I’m not a kid anymore.

That was what he had said to his worried mother when he had decided to live in the dormitory alone. I’m not a kid anymore, he had reassured her.

He didn’t want to worry his mother in London, nor his father in New York. Both of them were chasing their dreams; that was why he

had convinced them that he wanted to chase his dreams too, since he wasn't a child anymore.

But... what if there's a disease in my right leg?

Both of his legs throbbed painfully, along with the beating of his heart. When he realized it, he was groaning in pain.

"Kento! Kento, your leg hurts, doesn't it?" He lifted his covers to see Tomoya peering at him with concern.

"I'm fine... go back to sleep." With that, Kento rolled over. Suddenly, a fierce pain shot through his legs, and a groan escaped through his gritted teeth. He managed to swallow it before he turned to the wall. He pulled the covers over his head again.

The pain grew worse, and tears pried his eyelids apart. Kento bit his lip.

Damnit, I will not cry.

He wasn't sure how long he had endured the pain like that.

"Are you alright?" he heard a low voice suddenly whisper at his ear. "Look this way, Kento."

As he lethargically opened his eyes and twisted his neck, he saw Orihara looking down at him.

"...It's you."

"I'm sorry. If the pain was that bad, I should have prescribed you painkillers."

Orihara was wearing a collared shirt and pants instead of his lab coat. A large black bag was sitting at his feet. Orihara opened the bag and took out a medicine pouch.

"Are you up for taking some medication?" He looked around. "I'll go get some juice for you," and left the room. After some moments, he returned, out of breath and a can of orange juice in hand.

"Ah, that was a long way to the vending machine," he laughed as he pulled the tab and handed the can to Kento.

"Can you get up?"

"Yeah."

Kento managed to prop half of his body up. He took the medicine capsule from Orihara and washed it down with orange juice.

While he was busy with that, Orihara examined both of Kento's legs and changed his poultice.

The cool compress made the pain fade away, and Kento's head finally cleared enough for him to think. He was still a little dazed, but he managed to thank Orihara.

"How did you know?" he then asked.

Orihara smiled gently. "Tomoya contacted Mrs. Fujimoto to tell her you were in pain. Mrs. Fujimoto asked me to make a house call here."

Fujimoto, the school nurse, lived in this dorm. Tomoya had probably gone running to her room.

“Where’s Tomoya?”

“He said he would stay over at Mrs. Fujimoto’s room tonight.”

Kento looked at the bedside clock and saw that it was two in the morning. He whipped back to look at Orihara in surprise.

“You came all the way here at this hour?”

Orihara shook his head as if to say it was of no consequence.

“Just to let you know, Mrs. Fujimoto used to work as a nurse long time ago at my uncle’s clinic. That’s why she often asks me to make house calls, and I usually can’t say no. Besides, after I heard you were in pain, there was no way I could leave you like that.”

Orihara suddenly lowered his head with an apologetic look on his face.

“I’m sorry. I should have prescribed you pain medication. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize...”

Kento crawled under the covers again and looked steadily at Orihara. For a fleeting moment, he remembered how the man had been panting after hurrying to get him juice. The weight lifted from his heart, which had been heavy with anxiety. He felt a warm glow.

“Hey...” he mustered the courage to say what came next. “Can you stay with me a little longer?”

Orihara smiled and nodded. He took a handkerchief out of his pants pocket and wiped Kento’s sweaty forehead.

“Um...” Kento mustered the courage to open his mouth again.

“Would I have to amputate my right leg?”

Orihara widened his eyes and hastily removed his glasses.

“Not at all! Don’t tell me that’s what you were worried about?”

Kento began to think his concerns were immature, and blushed from the embarrassment.

“No, I just thought I’d ask,” he mumbled brusquely.

The apologetic look crossed Orihara’s face again, and he bobbed his head down in apology.

“I’m sorry. I should have filled you in properly. Instead I made you worry about needless things.”

Kento realized he was the one causing Orihara trouble.

“Don’t apologize,” he raised his voice in a hurried tone. “My imagination was just getting carried away.”

Orihara shook his head silently. Suddenly, he lifted his face and looked somewhere far away.

“You’re right. If you thought you were going to have to amputate your leg, you’d be surprised... and probably devastated.”

He reached out to take Kento’s hand.

“That won’t happen to you. I promise. You can rest easy. I’ll make you better.”

“Okay.”

Orihara’s hand was surprisingly smaller than Kento’s, but it was soft, and he could almost feel the man’s body heat flowing into him.

The painkiller seemed to have worked, for the throbbing in his leg gradually ebbed away. At last, Kento closed his eyes in peace.

When he opened his eyes next, the dazzling sunlight was streaming in through the window.

His leg still ached occasionally, but it wasn’t unbearable.

“Was that a dream?”

He saw the can of orange juice and the medicine pouch on his bedside table.

“It wasn’t. He really did come for me.”

Chapter 4

Managing Director Mori was the one who arrived the next day to accompany Kento to his appointment. Mori raked a hand through his wavy hair and looked worriedly at Kento.

“I’m responsible for what happens to you,” he said as he and Kento walked to Miyashita Clinic, located in front of the back gates of the school. “I promised your mother I would take good care of you.”

Kento stuck his lip out, feeling again like he was being treated like a child.

“I can take my health insurance card and go by myself.” He hadn’t told anyone about crying last night. “I’m fine on my own,” he announced confidently.

“You might be, but I still want to hear about it from the doctor. It’s my job to keep an eye on you since you’re a part of our agency, Kento.”

Kento was disappointed. He had actually planned not to say anything at all to the agency if he was told there was nothing wrong. He was starting to become worried that it would affect his audition prospects.

“Anyway, I’m fine,” he reassured Mori, although he didn’t have much of a basis to say so.

Miyashita Clinic was an old one-storey Japanese house surrounded by a fence of dark wooden slats. The fence ended in magnificent wooden gates, which were topped with a roof. On the gate pillar hung a sign that said “Miyashita Clinic” in brush writing.

A white signboard was propped up in front of the gates indicating the hours of operation. The entrance appeared to be through the smaller door beside the gates.

“You don’t see these kinds of clinics nowadays,” Mori commented. It was a short walk from the door to the entrance into the house, and the area around the pathway was lined with black pebbles.

They opened the glass-panelled sliding door and were met with a spacious area for taking off the shoes. A wooden shoe shelf, like the ones found at school, was placed against the wall. The blue linoleum floor was polished to a sheen.

A nurse with a ponytail who looked about thirty was sitting at the reception desk.

“This must be your first visit,” she said, her fox-like eyes smiling.

“The doctor is seeing someone else at the moment. Could you wait for a little while?”

Eventually, an older man with a burgeoning girth emerged from the consultation room.

“Oh, Mr. Kawano, for your next appointment, could you take a sample of your urine first thing in the morning and bring it with you?” Orihara’s voice called after him. “Mrs. Nakagawa, could you give him a urine container?”

“Yes, Doctor,” Nurse Nakagawa chirped energetically. She went to the cabinet and took out a small test-tube-like container. Kawano widened his eyes and adjusted his spectacles.

“Why, you can’t expect me to aim into that tiny thing!”

“Oh, Mr. Kawano, please,” Nurse Nakagawa burst out laughing. “You just need to put it into a paper cup or something first, and then put it in here.”

“Ah, that’s what you meant,” Kawano roared in laughter along with her, then fished some change out of his pocket and put it into the small round saucer at the reception desk.

“Well, see you, then.” With that, he left the clinic. Mori watched him leave, looking bewildered by the relaxed atmosphere.

“Next person, please,” came Orihara’s voice, and Mori and Kento entered the consultation room.

The room was about thirty square metres in area, with a desk and round stool in the centre and an examination table against the wall. The built-in shelf near the window contained test tubes, microscopes, and various medicine bottles.

Orihara was at the desk in a lab coat, filling in the patient record. When he noticed the two come in, he looked up and said, “Ah.” Mori politely inclined his head.

“We’re not related by blood, but I’ve come in place of Kento’s parents since they’re overseas.”

“Let’s take an X-ray first,” said Orihara, and went into the room behind him.

They heard some shuffling inside before Orihara popped his head out from behind the heavy-looking lead door.

“If you could come in. Just Kento, please.”

Kento went inside. It was a small room with no windows, and most of it was occupied by a strange-looking machine. An arm that looked like a power shovel extended from it, and there was a bed large enough for a person to lie down on.

“Can you lie down here?”

“Is this what an X-ray is?” Kento looked curiously around him.

“Yes. Don’t move. I’m going to take two pictures.”

Orihara laid Kento down on the bed, and placed a metal board

under his feet.

“What’s that?”

“You’re full of questions, aren’t you?” Orihara laughed as he explained. “The X-ray film is inside this flat metal box. Now, keep still.”

Orihara moved the mechanical arm over Kento’s right foot. After the X-rays were taken, Orihara took the metallic board and went into another room.

Mori and Kento were left behind in the consulting room. About fifteen minutes later, Orihara finally returned. The sleeves of his lab coat were rolled up, and he was holding a damp photograph.

“It’s developed.”

“Doctor, you developed that yourself?” Mori exclaimed in surprise.

“Yes. At the university hospitals, we have radiologists and other staff to do everything for us, but here, I do everything myself. Like examining blood under a microscope, and all that. I do learn a lot from it,” Orihara said, laughing as he hung the damp film against a light box.

“Of course, having an automatic developing machine makes things very easy.”

In the photo, against a black background, was what looked like a white leg bone.

Orihara scrutinized the photo carefully. He let out a short breath, then he pulled out a flat, square box from under his desk and extracted a similar-looking X-ray film. He hung it next to Kento’s X-ray.

“This is called the tibia, the bone of your shin. This here is the patella, or your kneecap.”

Orihara pointed at the film as he spoke.

“The ligament that supports the kneecap is attached to this, the tibial tuberosity. Look: can you see the difference between Kento’s film and this one?”

Mori compared the two images.

“This part on Kento’s knee looks bumpier than the other one.”

Orihara nudged his glasses up and nodded.

“You’re right. I had suspicions when I examined Kento’s leg yesterday, but now from the photo we know for sure.”

Kento shivered as he sat perched on the stool, his fists clenched in his lap.

“What am I sick with?” he asked Orihara, who had his back turned to him. Orihara turned his body around to face Kento.

“It’s called Osgood-Schlatter disease, a disease of your bone. It’s nothing bad. It’s seen often in growing adolescents.”

Both Mori and Kento swallowed nervously, waiting for Orihara’s

next words on the disease they had never even heard of. Orihara went on to explain briskly.

"If too much stress is put on the bone during a growth spurt, from too much exercise, for example, this causes an abnormality in the tibial tuberosity. This causes severe pain in the knee during exercise."

Kento's anxiety was somewhat lessened from Orihara's reassurance that it wasn't anything bad. Nevertheless, he stared at Orihara intently and asked, "How will it get better?"

"As I said earlier, excessive exercise is one of the causes, so you'll have to avoid exercise and stay rested for a while."

"Does that mean..." Kento widened his eyes and turned to Mori. Mori voiced his question.

"Kento is doing dance right now. Are you saying he would have to take some time off?"

Orihara looked back at the images.

"In mild cases, reducing exercises is often enough. But in Kento's case, the bone looks to be in quite bad condition. Dancing is very intense exercise and is particularly stressful on the knees. I'm sorry, but he will have to stop."

"No way!" Kento found himself yelling. "I can't just quit dancing!"

Orihara calmly looked at Kento. "Kento, it doesn't mean you're never going to dance again. You're only taking a short break. Think about it carefully. You're mature enough to understand. You're not a child anymore, are you?"

The word "child" was enough to make him shut up. He swallowed his complaints.

He's right. If I put up a fuss now...

Mori might lose faith in Kento completely, and tell his mother that he didn't think he could handle taking care of Kento after all. Kento had just told her not to worry because he wasn't a child anymore. Now was the time to prove that he was mature.

Kento set his face while he cast his thoughts frantically about. He nodded meekly, then flashed a smile at Mori.

"The doctor's absolutely right. I'll follow his advice and focus on getting my leg better first. Could you hold off on firing me until then?"

A look of relief crossed Mori's face.

"You're taking it like a man, Kento. I'm impressed. Of course I won't fire you. Even if you can't dance, you can use the time for vocal training."

Despite that, Mori's eyes were coloured with disappointment, and Kento knew that the road to debuting with the new group had been closed off to him.

"For how long am I not allowed to exercise?" he murmured to

Orihara.

“At least six months. One year, if it looks bad. We’ll take an X-ray every month to see how you’re progressing and decide from there. You’re only banned from hard exercise. Otherwise, you can live your life as you normally would.”

Mori parted with Kento at the dorm entrance.

“I’ll e-mail your mother about this, but I want you to give her a call and tell her about it, too. Understand?” He clapped Kento on the shoulder. “I have high expectations for you. This injury doesn’t change that. Your chance will come, so be patient and work hard.”

Although Mori’s tone was gentle, Kento could tell that this was his final notice. His debut was not going to happen.

Tomoya was at his desk when Kento got back to his room. The boy turned around with a concerned look.

“How was it, Kento?”

Kento took off his jumper and sat down on the bed. “They said it’s no big deal,” he said, making sure his voice was bright.

“That’s good!” Tomoya said happily.

“But I won’t be allowed to dance for a while.”

“What? Really?” Tomoya nearly kicked his chair over as he approached the bed. “Why not?”

“I can’t put too much strain on my leg. The doctor said I have to stop dancing for at least six months,” he said bitterly, then glared at Tomoya. “Aren’t you glad to have one less person to compete against?”

“What... that’s not how I feel at all.” Tomoya chewed his lip. “I’m really worried about you, you know. Why would I ever be happy that you’re injured?”

Tomoya’s voice was strained and he sounded like he was about to cry. Kento loathed himself. Tomoya had looked out for him when he first transferred to this school. He knew well enough that Tomoya was a cheerful, honest boy who wasn’t two-faced.

Nevertheless, he was unable to apologize. Kento sat at his desk without saying any more.

It’s all his fault.

An image of Orihara in his lab coat rose in his mind.

It’s all because he said I had the knee condition.

He knew he was just looking for someone to blame, but in this state, he could not cope without finding someone to make into the bad guy. Yet again made aware of his own childishness, Kento spiralled once more into self-loathing.

Kento saw Orihara again two days later, after school. Kento was not involved in any after-school clubs since he already belonged to an entertainment agency.

But now that he had no dance lessons to go to, Kento found himself with too much time to spare after classes. Tomoya had once invited him to come to the studio, anyway.

“Let’s go together,” he had said. “You can do voice training over there.”

But the last thing Kento wanted to deal with was the pitying glances of his group mates. He wanted even less to wallow in self-pity by thinking that they were all actually happy that he was out.

“I’m not going,” he said firmly. He felt miserable just watching Tomoya get ready to go out, so he left the room in a hurry.

There was a small wooded area behind the dormitory, where the coloured leaves from Gingko and Oriental plane trees fluttered to the ground.

Kento had always been so busy with lessons at his agency that he had no idea about this peaceful place. But the trees looked somewhat forlorn in the low-hanging autumn afternoon sun, and he was far from in the mood to enjoy nature.

“Damn it!”

He angrily kicked at the heaps of fallen leaves on the dark earth. Just then, he thought he heard soft chuckling.

He turned around to see Orihara in a casual outfit of pants and a shirt with rolled-up sleeves. He had a black doctor’s bag in one hand and was standing a little way off, looking at him.

“You again?” Kento said. “You sure come around often.”

“Yeah. I got asked to do a house call.” Orihara adjusted his glasses. “You look like you have some free time on your hands,” he remarked.

“Yeah. Suddenly I have nothing to do,” Kento said spitefully.

“Then, how would you like to come over and have some tea?”

Kento knew that even if he went back to his room, Tomoya wouldn’t be there. And he didn’t feel like going back to study all alone.

“Okay,” Kento said decisively, and followed after Orihara. “I haven’t got permission from the dorm to go out, but they shouldn’t have a problem if I’m with you, right?”

Orihara returned with Kento to Miyashita Clinic, where Nurse Nakagawa greeted them with a smile.

“How nice of you to come by,” she said.

“Mrs. Nakagawa, we’ll be having coffee in the living room. If a patient comes, could you let me know?”

Orihara walked past the consultation room and invited Kento into the living room in the back. The room was spacious and Western-style, and about as large as the consultation room. There was a sofa, a large table, and a sideboard overflowing with golf competition trophies, Hakata dolls, and other knick-knacks. There was also an ancient-looking stereo system.

Orihara went into the kitchen adjoining the living room and turned the coffee maker on.

“Have a seat right there. I’ll bring your coffee over.”

There was a rack beside the antique record player containing stacks of LPs.

“Wow. This is so cool!” Kento extracted a few records and examined them with interest.

“You find vinyl records cool?” Orihara appeared with a tray, laughing. “But they’re outdated. It’s all about CDs now, isn’t it?”

“Actually, no,” Kento countered. “You need vinyl records to do a DJ mix.”

A look of understanding crossed Orihara’s face as he put the tray down on the table.

“I see. I remember now, you’re a dancer, right? Dance music, huh.”

Kento was abruptly brought back to the reality that he was no longer allowed to dance. He put the LPs back on the shelf and looked at his feet.

“But it doesn’t matter anymore. I can’t dance, anyway,” he said brusquely.

“Don’t talk about it like that,” Orihara said reprovingly. “It’s not like you have to give up dancing for the rest of your life. Once your leg is better, you can dance whenever you want.”

“But there’s no point if I can’t dance now,” Kento shot back irritably as he glared at Orihara. “Now I can’t even try out for the audition, and I’m going to fall behind everyone else. It’s all over!”

He knew he was being immature, but he couldn’t stop the words from coming out.

“You’d never understand how I feel, Doctor!”

Orihara looked steadily back at Kento. “No, I do,” he said quietly.

“As if you would!”

Orihara sighed and picked up his mug of coffee. “No, I do understand.”

Kento faltered at his grave tone. Orihara took a sip of coffee and continued.

“I went to Shonan Private School for senior high school. Same as you. I was on the track team, and it was my dream to enter the Ekiden relay race.”

“You were a runner?” Kento was surprised. He had assumed that

Orihara was a bookish student because of his slender frame and glasses. "You don't look like an athlete."

Orihara smiled wryly at Kento's frank response. "I guess not," he said. "But anyway, I ended up injuring my knee. Everyone told me not to push myself until I was better, but...."

Kento found himself listening intently to this unexpectedly personal story. Orihara said he had felt like he was being left behind, just like Kento, and had secretly continued to train at night.

"In the end, I had to be put into the hospital for quite a long time. My worst fears came true: I was never allowed to run again."

Kento stood rooted to the spot in front of the record player. Orihara fixed him with an earnest gaze.

"I understand the panic you're feeling. Really well. That's why I don't want you to push yourself too far."

"Oh, now I see." Kento felt his resistance towards Orihara diminish instantly.

"Come here and have some coffee."

Kento promptly went to his side and sat down on the sofa. He looked at Orihara as he brought the mug of coffee to his lips. Orihara's eyes softened as he looked back at him.

"In a year or so, you'll be able to dance just as well as you used to. Remember what your manager said? You can use that time to do voice training or other stuff."

Maybe he was right. He began to feel like it was a better idea than pushing himself now and never being able to dance again.

"What made you want to start dance?" Orihara asked him with a smile.

"Hmm, let's see," Kento said thoughtfully, "well, I guess it's because you don't have to speak the same language to dance together."

"Hm?" Orihara looked a little puzzled, so Kento began to explain.

"My dad was a photographer, and when I was little our whole family used to travel to a lot of places together. He's working in New York right now."

They had travelled from Mongolia to China, Siberia, and crossed the Bering Strait to Alaska to descend to South America. In every country, Kento had been able to make friends just by jumping into the circle of people and dancing with them.

"Even in Harlem, New York. Everyone was really good at street dance, and they would let me into the group and teach me even though I didn't speak the language."

He would feel a sense of unity when he danced with them.

"It's a really great feeling."

Orihara nodded. "Running on the track is the same. I used to get

that feeling when I ran with other people. Once we crossed the finish line, it didn't matter who was on your team or who wasn't. After the competition was over, you'd just feel like you've accomplished something big together."

"Yeah! That's exactly what it's like!" Kento couldn't help but shout with joy at being understood. "Oh, sorry for yelling." He stuck his tongue out sheepishly. Orihara's eyes narrowed tenderly as he looked at Kento.

"Good, do you feel better now?"

"A bit."

"Doctor, there's a patient here to see you," Nurse Nakagawa's voice came from the consultation room.

"Alright, I'm coming." Orihara stood up.

"Can I visit again?" Kento asked. Coming to Orihara's clinic seemed more enjoyable than being alone in his dorm room. "I have nothing to do, anyway. And you don't seem too busy, either, Doctor."

"Feel free to come anytime," Orihara said, laughing.

Kento began to visit Miyashita Clinic every day to see Orihara. Much of it was because he felt awkward to be in the same room as Tomoya, who was steadily advancing his career. Another part of him had started to see Orihara like an upperclassman to look up to, especially after learning that Orihara had suffered the same troubles as he did.

Orihara had consultations until five o'clock, during which Kento studied and did his homework back at his dorm. Once the clock struck five, he went bursting out the door.

Orihara seemed to appreciate his company as well, since he lived alone. Soon, he began inviting Kento over for dinner.

Thankfully, Kento did not get in trouble for being away for days without permission. Apparently the dorm had found it unnecessary to give him a warning, since he was only visiting the school doctor. The dormitory head, in fact, was the husband of the school nurse, Mrs. Fujimoto.

One day, Orihara explained to him why that was.

Until a few years ago, Fujimoto had been a nurse at Miyashita Clinic. She loved children and took good care of Orihara as well. Once her own daughter became a nurse and left home to be independent, Fujimoto took the leap to go back to nursing college to become a qualified school nurse. She chose this path in hopes of taking care of many more children. Although Miyashita Clinic suffered from her loss, in a convenient turn of events, Fujimoto's daughter got married, left her job at the hospital, and began to work at Miyashita Clinic instead.

On the other hand, Fujimoto's husband, a long-distance truck driver, had gotten into a collision which left him with retinal detachment and deteriorated vision. He was forced to retire from his job.

Luckily, Shonan Private School happened to have open positions for a live-in dormitory head and a school nurse. Both Fujimoto and her husband took the chance to make their career changes.

"That's why both my uncle and I owe Mrs. Fujimoto a lot. If she asks me to make a house call, I can't say no."

Orihara smiled at Kento, who was over for a visit.

"But not many people have both a school nurse's license and a regular nurse's license. It's incredibly helpful to have Mrs. Fujimoto around."

Orihara explained that school nurses were not quite as qualified as doctors or nurses, which meant they were not allowed to perform medical procedures.

“A regular school nurse wouldn’t be allowed to carry out medical procedures, but since Mrs. Fujimoto has a nurse’s license, she can help me give needles.”

“Wow, really? I always thought school nurses were doctors, but I guess they’re completely different.”

“A school nurse’s job is to protect the health of the students, not to make their injuries or illnesses better. Their job is actually completely different.”

Apart from a school nurse, Shonan Private School also had two counsellors to take care of students’ mental health. They lived off-campus and worked in shifts at the counselling room.

Kento had yet to go to counselling room. He was usually bursting with energy, so he often visited the infirmary more frequently to get his cuts and scrapes treated. He remembered Fujimoto treating his wounds, and asked, “But school nurses are still allowed to wrap bandages and disinfect wounds, right?”

Orihara laughed again. “That’s household medicine, so everyone’s allowed to do it. If you were a child and you scraped your knee, your mother would be the one to disinfect it and put a bandage on it, right?”

“Oh, right.”

Nurse Nakagawa often prepared dinner for them, but “preparing” only went as far as laying the ingredients out. Kento endured the first few meals cooked by Orihara, like his soggy stir fry and undercooked curry, but before long, his patience snapped.

Kento spoke up one evening as Orihara clumsily wandered back and forth in the kitchen.

“I’ll make dinner,” he offered. He walked over and took the knife from Orihara. “I thought you’d be good at cooking since you said you lived on your own for a long time. But you’re not. I don’t believe it!”

“It’s not that bad, is it? It’s still edible.” Orihara looked uncertainly at him in an apron.

“It’s edible, yeah, since it’s not rotten. But it tastes like crap!”

Kento kicked a dejected-looking Orihara out of the kitchen and into the living room.

“You can go study or something, Doctor.”

Cooking came as second nature to Kento. He had grown up with outdoorsy parents, and they had camped often when they travelled. He wasn’t the best at making complicated dishes, but he was always looking for ways to get the best taste with as little effort and time as possible.

He saw the bag of bread crumbs, eggs, and two thick slices of pork

chops sitting on the cutting board and deduced that Orihara was going quite beyond his abilities by attempting to make breaded pork cutlets.

"I can't believe this. You're overestimating yourself. I bet you anything you'd probably end up undercooking it. And look: the bread crumbs are moldy!"

He rifled through the cupboards and found a box of corn flakes that wasn't expired.

"I'm going to make Wiener schnitzel," he announced. This would only use a small amount of oil, which meant less to clean up and less harm to the environment.

He ran the knife into a few spots on the pork chops to cut the tendons, then began tenderizing it with the back of the knife. When the meat was well flattened out, he dipped it into the beaten egg mixture, then coated it with corn flakes that he had ground into crumbs.

"With a side of potatoes, of course." He cut a cross into the whole potatoes before wrapping them in plastic wrap and putting them into the microwave.

"Now for a little colour."

He found a can of peas, which he drained and doled out around the potato, letting their heat warm them up.

"Done!"

Orihara took a bite. "It's delicious," he exclaimed. "Kento, you're amazing. Now I can see why your parents trusted you to live by yourself."

Kento beamed proudly, sure that he had impressed Orihara. "You're pretty bad at cooking for someone who's lived by himself for so long," he quipped.

"Can't deny that," Orihara ducked his head sheepishly.

"Where's your hometown, Doctor?" Kento asked while he was at it, since the topic had never come up before.

"Kanazawa," Orihara answered as he poked at his potato. "I've been living out here since high school, but I never had to cook for myself since I was living at my uncle's place. In university, I was too busy to cook, so I just ate out. To tell you the truth, I've only started my cooking routine recently."

"What? So all of those times you fed me, you didn't know what you were doing?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Orihara said, laughing, which made Kento burst out laughing along with him.

After dinner, Orihara got to work on the computer. He said he was aggregating all of the cases he had handled at the university hospital.

“It’s a system called physician certification, and you have to submit a report that summarizes all of the cases you’ve handled at the university hospital. You need to do it to be certified as a surgeon,” Orihara explained.

Kento decided to put on his headphones and listen to DZ’s new song on his Walkman. He wouldn’t be background-dancing for them for some time, but he still wanted to do whatever he could to prepare.

“Kento, do you still go to your management office?” Orihara asked. “You come here almost every day, even on weekends. I don’t see you going over there much anymore. You might not be able to dance, but you should still take some acting lessons or do some voice training.”

“Yeah, I know, but...” Kento took off his headphones and answered rather carelessly. “I’m not scheduled to debut anyway, so the voice instructor doesn’t take me seriously. All he does is tell me to sing from my belly. I’m starting to get sick of it.”

“From your belly? Is that a vocalization method?” Orihara tilted his head slightly.

“Probably. I think he means I have to put air in my belly.” Kento thumped his belly over his T-shirt.

“Hmm, I don’t think that’s quite it.” Orihara cocked his head again. “Kento, have you ever heard of abdominal breathing?”

“Of course I have.”

Orihara opened a medical book that was lying nearby and brought it over to where Kento was sitting on the sofa.

“When you inhale, this part called the thorax ? the part surrounded by your rib cage ? expands, and lets air into your lungs. This other part, called the diaphragm, is also important.”

Orihara pointed at a page with an anatomy chart.

“The diaphragm is the muscle that separates the chest and abdomen. When you use your diaphragm effectively, it’s called abdominal breathing. It doesn’t mean the air goes into your stomach.”

“Oh, okay. When he said I had to let my belly swell, I thought he meant I had to put air into it.”

Orihara managed to repress a laugh and keep a straight face while he continued to explain.

“You have to concentrate on using your diaphragm. That way, you’ll be able to get more air into your lungs.”

Kento lowered his gaze onto his stomach. “How do I move my diaphragm?”

“Let’s see....” Orihara thought for a moment, then said, “Open wide and breathe out as much air as you can. So much that you can’t exhale anymore.”

“Okay.” Kento inhaled deeply before exhaling as much as he could.

“Once you think you can’t breathe out anymore, purse your lips

and blow like you're blowing out a candle. You should be able to get more air out."

"You're right!" Kento exclaimed with wide eyes, once he had exhaled with pursed lips. He had exhaled until he felt like he had emptied every cubic centimeter of air from his lungs, yet he had still been able to breathe out a lot of air from his chest.

"Did you feel your abs flex when you did that?"

"Actually, come to think of it, I did!" Kento nodded. It was exactly as Orihara said.

"That's your diaphragm and abdominal muscles working. Your diaphragm borrowed power from your abdominal muscles to push up your lungs, which made you breathe out more air. When you inhale deeply after that, you can take in more air than before."

"Uh-huh."

Orihara explained with a simple analogy.

"It's like a sponge. If you wring it well, it'll be able to absorb more water than if you only wrung it a little."

Kento exhaled again like he was told. He pursed his lips and expelled the last bit of air from his lungs, then inhaled as deeply as he could. He felt his abdominal muscles working harder.

"Consciously keep up the abdominal breathing, and soon you'll get more used to using your diaphragm effectively."

Kento nodded enthusiastically at Orihara's words.

"You're right, this is amazing! You have this scientific way of teaching. Guess it helps being a doctor!"

"Actually, no," Orihara said, laughing as he shook his head. "Remember I used to be on the track team? I learned abdominal breathing from my coach."

Kento looked at him with renewed admiration.

"But still, you're pretty amazing, Doctor."

"I suck at cooking, though," Orihara added, and Kento burst into laughter.

When Kento went to voice training classes the following week, he was complimented for the first time by his trainer, Hamanishi. This was a first triumph for Kento, whose singing had never been as good as his dancing.

"The tension in your voice box is gone, and instead there's more power in your abdomen. You're headed in the right direction." Hamanishi looked satisfied as he closed the lid of the piano, finishing their lesson.

"Sound-collecting mikes at concerts will help, and tracks can always be adjusted in the recording studio, but either way, putting

stress on your voice box wouldn't have made you last very long."

Kento felt immensely proud of himself, but froze at Hamanishi's next words.

"You know, I was actually having second thoughts about recommending you. But if you keep up your singing and continue to improve, you'll have no problem. It's really a pity that you've hurt your leg."

"Are you talking about the audition?"

"Yeah," Hamanishi said, unfazed. "Well, Oka and Nishimura are definitely in, and I recommended Tomoya for his sugary-sweet voice. I'd say the results were good. I would have wanted one more person, though, to balance the sound."

He was right about Tomoya's high, sultry voice. His dancing was average, but when it came to singing, he was a head above the rest. But Kento was astonished to know that Tomoya had already passed the audition. He hadn't known until then. Tomoya had told him nothing.

I know he probably kept it from me out of kindness. But it feels worse. It's like he feels sorry for me.

Kento's spirits sank rapidly, when just moments before he had been itching to tell Orihara the good news. When he returned to the dorm and saw that Tomoya was home early for once, he found he couldn't look the boy in the eye. He turned on his heel, went right back out of the dorm, and headed straight to Miyashita Clinic instead.

"What's the matter? You're awfully early," Orihara asked in surprise. He was still sitting in the consultation room.

"Um, I just felt horrible about myself and I couldn't stand being my room. Can I listen to some records at your place, Doctor?"

"As long as you keep the volume down."

Kento turned the volume low enough so the sound wouldn't reach the consulting room, then lay down on the sofa to lend his ear to the classical music.

He picked "Finlandia," which had been used in a movie, to cheer him up. The movie was about a gallant, unconquerable hero facing terrorists all by himself.

Orihara eventually came to join him in the living room.

"Doctor, I have good news and bad news. Which one do you want to hear first?"

"Good news, of course." Orihara laughed and sat down in the arm chair in front of Kento.

"My voice trainer complimented my singing for the first time. It's all thanks to you teaching me abdominal breathing. That's the good news."

"What's the bad news?"

Kento put the record sleeve on the table and sighed.

"Remember I told you we were doing auditions at the agency for the new group that's going to debut? My roommate Tomoya got in. He's going to debut."

"That's good news, isn't it?" Orihara asked curiously. Kento thought about it.

"...Maybe." Then, he gave a deep sigh again. "Yeah. You're right. It's good news. It's my heart that's bad."

"Your heart?" Orihara leaned forward and peered into Kento's face. "What do you mean?"

"Well, remember I said I was feeling horrible about myself? I'm just jealous of Tomoya. I'm such a kid, aren't I? I wonder why I can't just congratulate him when he deserves it."

As Kento sat dejected, Orihara smiled and gently took his hand.

"You know what? Not everyone in the world is like Mother Theresa or Gandhi. Adults get jealous, too. So there's nothing wrong with your heart."

"Yeah, but..." Kento irritably pulled his hand away from Orihara's, then crossed his arms behind his head and flopped back onto the sofa. "That's not it," he said. "Tomoya didn't tell me. That's what gets to me. It's like he feels guilty about it. If he saw us as equals, he wouldn't do that. He's probably doing it because he feels sorry for me."

Orihara's eyes crinkled into a smile behind his glasses. Then, he turned aside and lapsed into thought.

"Does feeling guilty really make you unequal?" he murmured.

"Doesn't it? If it was me, I'd tell my friends I got the audition and I'd ask for their support."

"Well... I don't think Tomoya kept it a secret from you because he felt sorry for you. Maybe he didn't want you to get jealous and hate him for it."

Orihara turned his gaze back to Kento, and he spoke with a sincere and definite tone.

"When Tomoya saw you in pain at night, he didn't turn a blind eye. That proves he cares about you."

Kento was in awe at how forgiving Orihara could be. But when Orihara said it like that, the more true it began to sound. His words penetrated straight to his heart.

"Alright," Kento said as he thought. "I'll tell Tomoya this: I'm a little jealous, but that's because I'm a normal person, and I'm not Mother Theresa, and that it's normal and it doesn't mean that I hate him. Does that sound alright?"

Orihara smiled. "That sounds perfect," he said brightly.

Chapter 6

The quiet nights that Kento spent with Orihara had become a strange source of comfort that he had never experienced before. Sometimes, Orihara would tutor him. Other times, Kento found himself wanting to talk about his family and his childhood.

One night while they were listening to records, the topic turned to their families.

“My mom and dad both went to N. University. I think I was able to get into this school because of their connections.”

Kento’s mother and father were college sweethearts who had first met at N. University and gone on to get married. Ikuto, his father, had been in the Film Arts department aiming to become a photographer; his mother, Hisae, had been in Fine Arts. Right after getting married, the two had gone on a globetrotting trip. Kento was born soon afterwards, but the two took him along and continued their travels.

“That was quite daring of them, wasn’t it?” Orihara said with an air of amazement.

“Really? I can’t tell. Mine is the only family I’ve known,” Kento said indifferently.

“I’m sure it must have been difficult flying with you when you were still a baby,” Orihara mused out loud.

“Actually,” Kento said, and began a story that he had heard from his mother. “Apparently, one way to make me fall asleep right away was to make me listen to rock, especially heavy metal. I must have liked it since I was born if it was enough to be my lullaby.”

Orihara only widened his eyes in bewilderment.

Sometimes, Kento talked about the many countries he visited with his parents. He once talked about his trip to Peru. His mother had fallen in love with the beautifully-dyed fabrics there, which led to her beginning her studies in textiles.

“Lake Titicaca was so unbelievably blue. They said it’s because the sky is blue and the air is thin. Apparently if you go high enough, it’s indigo like in space.”

“That’s right,” Orihara nodded quietly as he perused a medical book on the sofa. “There’s less dispersion of light when the air is thinner, and you see more shades of blue, which have shorter wavelengths.”

Many reeds grew in Lake Titicaca. The indigenous peoples would use them to weave baskets as well as ships, houses, and all manners of things.

“That’s where my mom learned to dye fabric.” Kento and his

family had been so smitten by the place that they had ended up living there for half a year. "That's why I was a year late going into primary school."

Orihara looked convinced. "Ah, now I see why."

"I learned how to play a flute called a quena," Kento said casually. Orihara watched him with interest.

"You're pretty mysterious, you know."

"Huh? How?" Kento looked up from where he was sitting on the floor.

"No, never mind. Tell me more about your trips."

"Are my stories interesting?" Kento looked at him curiously. They had been everyday experiences for his family.

"Yes. Very interesting. Normal people wouldn't be able to experience all of that," Orihara replied with a smile. "I feel like I've become the king in *The Arabian Nights*. I get to sit here and hear all these stories from a different world."

Kento burst out laughing. "I'll tell you as many stories as you like. Are they really that unusual? It's all normal stuff to me."

Kento's father moved to New York City shortly after Kento began primary school, and began doing most of his work there. Ikuto then went on to become an exclusive photographer for *National Geographic*. His mother, Yasue, decided after much debate to live apart from him.

"She said she wanted me to go to primary school in Japan," Kento added. But on extended breaks, such as during the summer, he and his mother would go to New York to visit his father. That was where Kento first encountered hip hop dance and fell in love with it.

When Yasue invited him to come along with her to London, Kento was torn at first. In the end, he chose to stay with Sion Promotion and continue dancing.

"I don't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing," Kento made a dubious face and looked up at Orihara. I certainly wasn't asking for my leg to get hurt, but I still was able to meet him. His parents had always been ones to take problems in stride, and often said that bad luck often brought good luck. He figured this was probably what they meant.

"What's wrong? Now you're all quiet. Did you start missing your mother and father?" Orihara said with a smile. Kento blushed.

"It's not like that," he protested. "Stop treating me like a kid."

The numerous vinyl records were simply stuffed in a disorderly fashion into the rack. Kento didn't need another excuse to offer to sort them out. As he went through them, he found that most of them were

classical music records, apart from a few Beatles LPs.

“Oh, those are mine,” Orihara said to a very surprised Kento.

“Yeah, I figured as much.”

Orihara chose one out and put it on the turntable. “Songs back then used to be really short, including the Beatles’. They were all about two minutes or so, so they’re finished before you know it.”

“Are you a Beatles fan?” Kento asked as he gazed at the now-legendary album cover.

“Well... a friend of mine in high school loved the Beatles, and I guess he kind of rubbed off on me. His father, on the other hand, was a Beatles fanatic, in the real sense,” Orihara said to him. “Anyway, I even bought a guitar so I could practice.”

“What? You can play the guitar? I thought you’d be the serious type who only cared about studying.”

Orihara looked mildly offended. “I told you, didn’t I? I was an athlete until tenth grade. I’m a varsity boy at heart.” He then chuckled a little at his own words. “I guess that makes me weird for playing guitar, then, doesn’t it?”

After some begging on Kento’s part, Orihara dug out his guitar from storage. It wasn’t the electric guitar that Kento had expected, but a common acoustic guitar.

“It’s not electric?” Kento said in slight disappointment. Orihara smiled wryly.

“This one’s called a flat top. I hear kids these days start right off-the-bat with electric, but this type of guitar is your most basic one.”

No one at Sion Promotion was part of a serious band, since the agency was geared to promoting pop idols. Kento had never even held a guitar before. He gazed inquisitively at the guitar that Orihara was holding.

“Can you play for me?”

“I’d have to change the strings first.” Orihara’s eyes narrowed nostalgically as he dusted the guitar off with a cloth. “But I don’t really play anymore.”

Kento was struck with an idea, and he proposed it loudly. “I’ll play it, then! Teach me!”

Orihara beamed again. “Sure. I don’t have any use for this anymore. You can have it, Kento.”

“Yay!” Kento grabbed Orihara’s hand in delight and shook it vigorously. His hand was softer and smoother than he’d expected, and it was a long time before Kento untwined his fingers from Orihara’s.

When Kento visited Orihara again the following week, a brand-new guitar was sitting on top of the stereo system in the living room.

“Is this??” Kento approached with wide eyes and cautiously reached out to touch it.

"I felt bad making you play my old guitar," Orihara said to him with a smile as he came back from the consultation room. "And it'll be easier for me to teach you if I play along."

"You're going to teach me?" Kento exclaimed, pouncing on Orihara. Orihara teetered as he lost his balance, and they both toppled on top of each other onto the sofa. Orihara was more slender and soft than he'd imagined, and Kento blushed in agitation.

"S-Sorry."

"You really seem to grow taller by the day," Orihara laughed as he crawled out from underneath Kento. "We were about the same height when we first met, but now you're a whole head taller."

"And you're skinny like a girl, doctor," Kento said in a teasing tone, trying to disguise the fact that he was flustered. This time, Orihara blushed.

"Keep talking like that, and I won't teach you."

"Wait, I'm sorry! I really am! Can you still teach me?"

Kento's desperate tone appeared to restore Orihara's mood. He smiled as he passed a book to Kento.

"You don't mind using my old learner's guide, do you?" Kento was given a book called *Guitar for Beginners*. He flipped through it. A simple set of notes ran along the staff. Kento looked at it and pouted.

"They're not Beatles songs?"

Orihara looked at him with exasperation. "You won't be able to play those right off the bat."

Underneath the staff was another staff, but this one had six lines. Instead of the black note heads, the stems were numbered with digits from 0 to 4.

Kento knew notation well enough to sing from them, but he'd never seen notation like this before. He anxiously looked up at Orihara.

"What's this?"

"It's called tablature. It shows you how to press the string down." Orihara told him that the numbers on 0 to 4 indicated the fingers used to press the strings down.

"Oh, okay. So finger 1 would be my index finger, and finger 2 would be my middle finger." Kento touched the strings with each.

"What's 0?"

"It means 'open string', which means you don't hold it down."

"Uh-huh..." Kento looked dubious. Orihara smiled gently at him.

"Don't worry. Once you learn the patterns for holding down the strings, you'll be able to play in no time."

Orihara walked around the sofa, where Kento was sitting, to stand behind him. He started by teaching him how to hold the guitar.

"Good. Align the groove in the guitar with your right knee, like

that.” Once he taught Kento how to hold it, he also slung the shoulder strap over his shoulder. “Wearing the strap while you sit will help keep the guitar still,” he said. Next, he went on to teach him how to hold the strings down with his left hand.

“You’ll have to start by memorizing the basic chords. The groups of chords are called chord progressions. You can play any song if you know the chord progression.”

Kento blanched when he saw the notations, labelled with letters like C and G.

“But there are so many!”

“Don’t sweat it. Just use your fingers and let your body do the memorizing. If you can remember complicated dance moves, you should have no problem with this. These are just your fingers.”

Orihara’s gentle encouragement helped Kento recover somewhat from being on the verge of giving up.

“As long as you’re going to teach me.” When he turned around to look over his shoulder, there was Orihara’s face at close range, his gentle eyes looking back at him.

“Don’t worry. I’m here with you.”

The same gentle voice echoed in his ears, the one that had whispered to him that night when he was in bed groaning from the pain in his knee.

“Yeah. I’ll try my best.”

Thankfully for Kento, he had a good ear to begin with, and he quickly improved at guitar.

“Your fingers are so long. Makes me envious,” Orihara said with an impressed air, seeing Kento get better and better at each practice session.

“Your fingers are long, too,” Kento said. It was true, but Orihara’s palm was smaller. Kento had been quick to master the difficult barre chord ? using the left index finger to hold down all six strings at once.

“It took me quite a while to get the hang of this, you know,” Orihara had said with a rueful sigh when he saw Kento pull it off.

On Saturdays and Sundays, Kento practiced for five or six hours at a time. Orihara seemed a little exasperated, but he assisted Kento for as long as time allowed him.

“But you have to keep up with your studies,” he did add as a warning.

“Then, can you tutor me, too?” Thus, Kento now also had his very own tutor. “Sorry. I know you need to study, too,” he apologized. Even he realized how intrusive he was being.

“Don’t worry about it,” Orihara said, his eyes softening into a

smile. "It's been a while since I played guitar, and I'm enjoying it. And besides, if your grades go down because I pulled you into playing the guitar, it's partly my responsibility."

"Do people ever tell you that you worry too much about other people?" Kento asked. He was happy that Orihara was being so kind, but he felt like he would end up taking advantage of his support. But then again, how long would he be able to enjoy Orihara's company? The thought occurred to him one night while Orihara was looking over his homework. He felt a throbbing pain in his heart.

"Hey, how long are you going to work at this clinic for?" he asked, looking at Orihara's handsome face before him. The man was reading a book while brushing up the hair falling across his forehead.

"How long? I'll always be here." Orihara looked up and smiled at him.

"But what about when your uncle gets out of the hospital?"

"I'd just be going back to where I used to work at N. University Hospital."

N. University Hospital wasn't too far from here. Kento was a little relieved.

"Aren't you going back to Kanazawa, though?" he asked again, anyway.

Orihara narrowed his eyes a little. "I won't go back. I'll always stay in Tokyo," he said firmly.

Thank goodness. Kento, filled with relief and joy, pounced on Orihara.

"What's gotten into you, all of a sudden?" Orihara said, looking slightly caught off-guard.

"Nothing," Kento said quickly. Thank goodness. If he's going to stay in Tokyo, I'd be able to see him anytime.

Thanks to the knee support and poultice, Kento barely felt any pain in his leg lately.

When he went to the infirmary for the first time in a while to get more poultice, Nurse Fujimoto greeted him with a smile.

"It's been a while, Kento," she said. "I remember you used to come almost every day to get poultice. I'm glad you're refraining from exercise. It was the right thing to do."

Kento scratched his head sheepishly. "I guess."

Just as he was about to leave with a bag of poultice, Kento remembered something.

"Oh, since I'm here, would I be able to get some extra Band-Aids?" His diligent practice with the guitar had left him with cracked fingertips.

“Oh dear. What’s happened to you this time?” Fujimoto sounded worried. Kento hastily opened his palms and showed them to her.

“I’m learning guitar from Dr. Orihara. I think I practiced a bit too much.”

“Goodness me,” Fujimoto said blinked in surprise. She took a box of Band-Aids from the medicine shelf, and cocked her head slightly as she looked at Kento. “Dr. Orihara playing guitar... what a surprise.”

“Why?” Kento asked out of casual curiosity.

“I thought he’d completely quit guitar and running ever since that incident.”

“That incident? You mean when he got hurt?”

Fujimoto looked troubled as she lapsed into silence.

“Yes,” she said eventually. “But Dr. Orihara must be quite fond of you, teaching you guitar. Maybe he feels like he’s gotten himself a little brother.”

Kento was a little hurt at Fujimoto calling him a little brother. He had always thought of himself and Orihara as equal friends.

“Am I like a little brother to him?”

“Well, of course,” Fujimoto said with a laugh. Her next words made Kento freeze. “He only has an older brother, so maybe he’s always wanted to have his own little brother.”

“Older brother?” He had never known Orihara had an older brother. It had never come up in their conversations. He had assumed all along that Orihara was an only child, like him.

“Dr. Orihara has an older brother? I’ve never heard that before.”

Fujimoto’s troubled look came back at his question.

“Well, yes. Yes, I suppose he’s an older brother.” Her sentence ended in a vague way. Fujimoto busied herself with the task of folding cut gauze into quarters. “But they’re very far apart in age, which was probably why they didn’t have a lot in common. Maybe that’s why they didn’t talk much.”

Kento was perplexed by Fujimoto’s explanation, which sounded more like an excuse, but he made a point of not pushing further. He was more surprised that he hadn’t known all this time that Orihara had an older brother. Kento realized for the first time that he really didn’t know much about Orihara.

Kento went back to his dorm room with his poultice and Band-Aids in hand, and lay down on his bed.

He said his hometown was in Kanazawa. Yes; he also vaguely remembered Orihara saying that his family owned a hospital. But Orihara had never talked about his parents, much less his older brother.

Maybe it’s because he thinks there’s no point in telling me. It was true, to an extent. But Kento had told Orihara about his family, his

school, his management office ? everything. Orihara had always smiled kindly and listened.

Maybe I was too busy talking about myself to listen. Perhaps that was it. He was such a kid for going on and on about himself without even trying to listen to the other person.

I want to know more about him! Yes; he wanted to know more. The impulse suddenly surged in his heart. He wanted to know everything about Orihara ? wasn't that what being close meant? I think of him as a close friend, but maybe he doesn't feel that way about me. That was a sad thought. Kento sprang up in bed. He realized he wanted to get better at guitar because that would put him on equal footing with Orihara.

Kento was also curious about Orihara's friend from high school. He didn't know the friend's name or face, but he knew Orihara had played Beatles songs on the guitar with him as a high-school boy.

Kento felt a little prick in his heart.

Once December rolled around, Kento began to spend all of his time at Orihara's place. Tomoya was busy both preparing for his own debut and touring with DZ. He barely returned to their dorm room anymore.

When Tomoya was around, Kento often fled to Miyashita Clinic to avoid the awkwardness, but now that he wasn't around, it was somewhat lonely. Being alone in the room made him feel like he had been left behind, and that made it unbearable to stay.

One night, Kento was preparing to go out with a mind to go to Orihara's place, but was called down and told that someone was on the phone for him. Kento went to the dorm head's room to take the call. It was his mother, calling from London.

"They always tell me you're out, and you never call. You must be really busy. Are you really that tied up with lessons and work?" she said in a somewhat exasperated way.

"Kind of," Kento lied.

"Will you visit me during the winter break?"

"No," Kento said flatly. He wanted to practice guitar with Orihara, and in that instant, he had an epiphany. He realized Orihara was the person he wanted most to be with.

"I know I don't have to worry about getting into university since I'll just get bumped up internally, but you know, I haven't been studying much since I've been away at the agency most of the time. I don't want to be kicked out just for failing school. That's embarrassing. I want to take time to do some serious studying."

Kento was almost appalled at himself for how easily the lies slipped off his tongue and how guilty he did not feel about them. I

guess it's true when they say being in love makes you start lying. Not that he was saying that Orihara was his lover, or anything.

His excuse about studying seemed to convince his mother instantly.

"You should come during your spring break, then."

"I will. Bye."

He would just have to think of a new reason to say no once spring break rolled around, Kento thought to himself, mentally sticking his tongue out as he hung up the phone.

The name for the new group that Tomoya was a part of was going to be called Chronos. They were planning the group's first performance during the winter break concert tour. News of Chronos had already been broadcast on variety shows and music shows on TV. Although they had yet to even release a CD, their popularity was already quite strong.

Understandably, it pained Kento to hear about all of the glamour. Once winter break started, he threw himself into practicing his guitar at Orihara's place. He pointedly made an effort not to watch any TV shows.

But one Sunday, Orihara turned the TV on during their meal. On the screen were the three members of Chronos, along with DZ.

"It's too bad. You had a good chance to be a member," Orihara said hesitantly, watching Kento's face carefully.

"Yeah, well...." Kento said vaguely as he ate the scallop carpaccio and penne casserole that he had cooked with extra effort tonight. "I don't really mind it anymore. It's more fun for me to be with you like this."

And he meant it. Kento almost surprised himself. He had loved dance so much, and it had been his life's calling. He realized for the first time that the pain of not being able to debut didn't sting his heart as much as it had used to.

"I'm sure the chance will come around for me to debut again. I wouldn't want it to take away the time I have with you, anyway."

"What are you saying?" Orihara said in exasperation.

"Well, it's true."

Kento was a little agitated at the strong emotions coiling inside him. The time they spent together, their everyday conversational exchanges, had become more important to him than anything.

Trust? Respect? It wasn't just that; Kento felt overwhelmed by the fact that there was indeed some other feeling there that he could not express in one word. He hastily changed the topic.

"Well, when I debut I'd rather do it alone. The Beatles went solo in

the end, too.”

Orihara seemed hard-pressed to make an argument.

“You’re right, they did.” He put his fork down with a saddened face. “I wish they’d get back together, but that’s never going to happen.”

Kento was relieved when the conversation changed to The Beatles, Orihara’s favourite topic.

“I’ll be famous one day, too, like The Beatles.”

Orihara’s eyes softened. “I’ll be looking forward to it,” he said.

In Tokyo, it often snowed until just past the first week of February. On this day, snow was seen fluttering in the air since afternoon.

A cold day like this called for oden ? stewed vegetables, eggs, meat, and fish cakes in clear broth. The decision was already made in Kento's mind the moment the snowflakes began to drift in the air. Just as he always did after school, he went back to his dorm room to finish his homework, and headed out right afterwards to the supermarket to buy the day's groceries.

When he arrived at Miyashita Clinic, he announced to Orihara in the consultation room that they were having oden tonight.

"That sounds delicious. I think that's what I'll make tonight, too," said Nurse Nakagawa as she took the receipt from him and handed him the cash from Orihara's wallet, which she was took care of.

Orihara looked out the window. "Mrs. Nakagawa, you can go home early before the snow starts to accumulate," he called to her.

Nakagawa was putting her coat on and getting ready to go home when the phone at the reception desk rang.

"Doctor, it's from a patient."

The call was from an elderly lady called Okumura, saying she had a stomach ache but would take a while to get to the clinic because snow was falling. Orihara thought for a while before he answered.

"Ms. Okumura, I'll head over there myself," he said, and hung up the phone.

He then began to put away ampoules and medicine inside his house-call bag.

"Mrs. Nakagawa, would you be able to drop me off at Ms. Okumura's place? I'll take a taxi back."

"Not a problem."

"You can count on me to take care of the place while you're gone," Kento said proudly. "I'll whip up some delicious oden while you're out."

Once the two of them left, dead silence fell around the house. It was as if the falling snow was blotting out all the sound around them. He felt like he was in a house nestled deep in the mountains, far away from civilization.

The room was filled with the gentle hissing of the oden simmering and its mouthwatering aroma. Kento was plucking the strings of his guitar absently.

The ringing of the telephone broke the silence in the living room. Kento approached the old-fashioned rotary phone.

“Wow, he still uses this?” Perhaps he didn’t have a choice, since it personally belonged to Orihara’s uncle, who was over seventy. Kento picked up the receiver.

“Yes, you’ve reached Orihara.”

There was a pause before a man’s deep voice answered over the line.

“Is Yuri there?” he asked.

“Um, Dr. Orihara is out making a house call right now.” He felt a stir of curiosity at the man calling Orihara by his first name, but nevertheless handled the phone call professionally.

“Are you a patient? I think Dr. Orihara will be back soon, but if you would like for him to call back I can take a message.”

There was another moment of silence.

“No. I’ll call again another time,” said the voice, and the line went dead.

I wonder who it was. I didn’t get his name. Oh well, he said he’d call back later, anyway. Then, he realized how much time had passed and went to the kitchen to turn off the stove.

“Oh, no, I’ve let the broth boil down too much,” he muttered as he added hot water, replaced the lid, and went back to the living room. “He’s taking awfully long. Is he having trouble catching a taxi?”

Kento was getting hungry, but that was the least of his troubles. He found himself suddenly getting worried.

“Don’t tell me he’s been in an accident?”

The rotary telephone rang again, and Kento pounced on it.

“Hello, you’ve reached Orihara!”

“Oh, it’s you again.”

It was the same low male voice, and Kento knew it was the same person from before.

“I’m sorry. He’s not back yet.”

The man on the other end seemed at a loss. “You,” he began hesitantly, “what’s your name?”

“I’m Kento Yamashiro, Yuri’s best friend,” Kento said in the most mature voice he could muster. It might be a little different from the truth, but it was true for him, at least.

“I see... Yuri’s best friend....” The man continued, sounding somewhat hesitant. “That’s fine, but... is Yuri really not home?”

“Huh?” Kento realized that the man suspected Orihara of pretending to be out. “He really is away doing a house call,” he insisted. “It’s just that it’s snowing outside, and the roads are probably congested right now.”

“Snowing? Is it snowing in Tokyo, too?” a surprised voice responded.

“What do you mean, in Tokyo, too? Where are you calling from?”

“Kanazawa.”

Hadn't Orihara said that his hometown was in Kanazawa? Kento felt a flag going up.

“Do you happen to be Yuri's...?”

“I'm Yuri's older brother,” the man introduced himself. “I want to ask you for a favour, since you say you're Yuri's best friend. Can I ask you to do this?”

He was so polite about it that Kento didn't have a reason to refuse. He told the man to go ahead.

“When Yuri comes home, please ask him to answer my calls.”

Orihara was refusing to even speak to his own brother ? what was that about?

“Um... are you in a fight?” Kento couldn't help but ask.

“No. Let me make this clear before you misunderstand: it's not that Yuri and I are on bad terms. His guilt towards me is making him go out of his way.” His voice was quiet and filled with sadness. Kento didn't know what to say back.

“I'll call back later,” the man said. “Please convince him to answer the phone when I do.”

After hanging up the phone, Kento went back to the sofa and picked up the guitar. But instead of holding the pick, he simply ran his fingers along the strings, recounting the phone conversation over and over in his head.

The snow outside was wet and heavy as it fell in the hazy orbs of light from the lamps at the gates. Their forlorn drifting was almost like that of dead microorganisms sinking into the depths of the ocean where no light shone.

There was no other sound, save for the occasional heavy thump of snow falling from the branches, and the faint humming of the strings when his fingers touched them.

When it had just started snowing, he could hear the sirens of the ambulance far away, but even that had ceased. Kento sat alone in silence, waiting for Orihara to return.

It was about an hour before Orihara finally came home.

“I'm sorry it took me so long.”

“I was worried!” Kento couldn't help but yell as he burst into the doorway to greet him. He moved forward to take Orihara's bag from him. His hand felt like ice.

“Look at you, you're frozen through!”

“You see, when I went to Ms. Okumura's house...” Although the woman had said it was a stomachache, upon further questioning she had confessed to feeling tightness in her chest, similar to heartburn.

Orihara had feared it might be a heart attack.

Okumura lived alone, so Orihara tried calling N. University Hospital, his former workplace. Coincidentally a physician classmate of his was working in the emergency room, and had told him to bring her immediately.

“So I called the ambulance, but it took forever to come. I suppose it was because of all the people who slipped and got injured because of the snow.”

When the ambulance finally did arrive to take them to N. University Hospital, the emergency room was packed with patients. After waiting in line and finally getting a consultation, Okumura was found to be suffering a heart attack after all, and was immediately charged to the hospital. Orihara had taken care of those procedures as well.

“They charged her even though the beds were full. I helped out at the emergency room for a bit to say thank you.” Orihara smiled as he wiped his wet hair with the towel that Kento had passed him.

“A senior doctor from my department happened to be there, and he milked me for all I was worth. That’s why I was late. I’m sorry for not calling you. I was also having trouble catching a taxi.”

At least he hadn’t been in an accident. Kento was relieved just for that.

“Go take a bath first and get warmed up.”

After ushering Orihara into the bathroom, Kento put the pot of oden back on the stove. He must be nice by nature. I can see why his brother would say he goes out of his way for him. But it still remained a mystery why he had to be so meek around his own brother. As for helping out in the emergency room tonight, Kento was almost sure that Orihara had not been asked, but had offered to do so himself.

He thought the occupation suited Orihara well; by nature, they needed to be meticulous and perceptive. Would he have become an athlete instead if he hadn’t been injured?

They sat in the dining room, helping themselves to the well-cooked oden. Kento decided to take the leap and ask him.

“Why did you become a doctor? Because of your family?”

“That’s one factor,” Orihara said, after pausing to think for a little. “After I injured my leg, I started wanting to get involved in healing other athlete’s injuries. I’m a general surgeon now, but in a few years I’d like to become a sports surgeon.”

Orihara took a sip from his can of beer before continuing.

“Athletes suffer a lot of injuries. Sometimes they hurt themselves from training too hard.”

“So you’re not going back to Kanazawa to run your family business?”

Orihara's face turned grave as he shook his head. "My older brother's already taken after the family hospital, so it's fine."

Kento put his chopsticks down and fidgeted in his chair.

"Um, actually, Doctor, your brother called a while ago."

Orihara's chopsticks paused, and the tofu fritter it had been holding dropped into his plate.

"What...? What did he say?"

"He said he'd call later," Kento said shortly, avoiding his eyes.

"Did he say anything else?"

"No."

"Alright," Orihara said brightly, unaware of Kento's lie. He picked up the tofu fritter again and brought it to his mouth. "It's delicious. Very flavourful," he said. "Well, that was filling. Do you mind if I take a rest?"

"Go ahead. I'll clean up." Kento watched from the sink as Orihara went into the living room and moved the rotary telephone to the table in front of the sofa. He then sat down and cradled his head in his hands. He was no doubt waiting for the call from his brother.

Once he finished the dishes, Kento hesitantly returned to the living room just in time to hear the telephone ring. Orihara immediately picked it up.

"Hello? Yes, it's me." His voice was quiet and hard to catch. Curious, Kento drew up closer. Orihara continued to speak, unaware that Kento was close by.

"No, no, that's not it. Please understand ? I'm not going to go home. Not until I get my doctorate. No, it's not your fault. I didn't mean to ? please, you don't have to feel guilty. Don't feel like you have to go out of your way for me."

Orihara shook his head as he listened to the voice that Kento could not hear.

"Please... I'm going to hang up now. Bye."

After their conversation ended, Orihara put the receiver down, bowed his head deeply, and cradled it with both hands. He stayed in that position for a long time.

Kento started getting worried, and took a step forward. He could tell that the man's slender shoulders were trembling slightly.

"Doctor," he called out.

"...Yes?" Orihara slowly turned to him. He took off his glasses and put them down on the table before scrubbing his eyes with both hands.

"What's wrong, Doctor? Did you get into a fight with your brother?"

His eyes were bloodshot. Kento realized that the man was crying.

"Did your brother get mad at you?"

“No. No... that’s not it.” Orihara forced a smile and shook his head, but his expression was like that of a bullied child silently pleading for his parent to understand. Kento felt choked up.

“Are you... on bad terms with your brother?”

“That’s not it, either.” Orihara shook his head again. Kento watched as tears welled up in his eyes. Kento had always thought it was childish to show one’s tears ? that crying in front of others was the last thing an adult man should do.

But Orihara’s tears told Kento of a story of deep sadness that even adults could do nothing about.

“Doctor!” Kento went to Orihara’s side and put a hand on his shoulder. Orihara clung tightly to it.

“All I do is... make people around me unhappy. Everyone suffers because of me. I should never have been born.”

“What are you saying?”

Kento held Orihara close as he continued to weep in a muffled voice. “I should never have been born,” he repeated tearfully.

“That’s not true, Doctor.” Kento put one arm around Orihara, and hooked his other hand on the man’s chin and made him look up. Orihara stared up at him with watery eyes. A tear spilled over from the edge of his eye, and he bit his lip and screwed his eyes shut.

“Doctor...”

Before he knew it, he had brought his lips to the tear that rolled down Orihara’s cheek. Orihara flinched when Kento’s lips touched him, but he kept his eyes closed as he slid his arms up Kento’s back and hugged him. Kento held him tightly, trying to convey as much heat as he could to Orihara’s frozen body.

The slender figure that trembled in his arms was drastically different from Kento’s impression of the mature, older man who had supported him until now. Kento rubbed him on the back like he would comfort a crying child. With his fingers, he touched Orihara’s thin lips.

“Don’t cry.”

He pressed his own lips against Orihara’s trembling ones. He pressed them over and over until the other man’s lips opened as if to invite him. Kento slid his tongue inside. A tense, breathy voice escaped from the other man, but he did not resist. Kento tangled his hot tongue with Orihara’s. Their heated kisses soon made his body temperature climb.

Kento laid Orihara down on the sofa and let his hand slide against his skin. He could feel Orihara respond when he groped lower. Kento kissed him repeatedly and closed his fingers around the man’s member in a natural motion.

Just once, he had done it before with a woman. She was an older woman he had met at a club in New York. She had put his condom on

for him?done everything. Before he knew it, it had been over.

If this was a woman he was doing it with right now, perhaps he would have been more hesitant. But the member in his hand was the same one as his own. All he had to do was do what he usually did by himself.

It only took a moment for Kento to make the decision. With confidence, he began to move his fingers. When he rubbed the tip, Orihara let out a cry, but Kento leaned forward and put his weight on the other man, continuing to restrict his movements while pleasuring him.

After that, Orihara only shook his head in resistance once, but eventually relaxed his body and lent himself to Kento.

Doctor....

Soon, Orihara's began to drip with the same dew as his own, and Kento quickened the movement of his fingers. He did it like he did with himself, putting pressure on the small, round hole at the tip.

The heavy snow falling around them shrouded their ragged breathing and slippery sounds, keeping them trapped inside the room. The breathing soon quickened its pitch, and ended in a short cry.

Kento caught the hot liquid in his hand, and looked down at Orihara who lay underneath him, limp with his eyes closed, his body completely in Kento's control.

"Doctor, can I?" Kento whispered in his ear, and laid bare Orihara's lower regions. He used the fluid in his hand as lubricant, which he applied to the man's lower part. He then pushed himself inside. It was his first time, but for Kento, it was a very natural act.

Orihara still had his eyes closed, but did not resist as he let Kento in. He curled up a little in pain as he accepted him, almost like a fetus connected to its mother inside the small womb.

Doctor, I'll protect you. He didn't know from what, but he knew he wanted to protect Orihara from anything that hurt him, with anything it took.

He gently held the man's shoulders as he slowly slid in, then quickly pulled out. When Kento pulled his hips away, Orihara clung to his neck, almost as if to tell him not to go. Kento hastily lodged himself deep inside again.

Orihara knitted his brow in pain, yet slightly turned up the corners of his mouth in a smile. Kento felt his heart swell with love so much that he couldn't breathe, and gave him more kisses.

Doctor, I love you. They were feelings he had realized for the first time, but Kento was not surprised. He had been in love for a long time.

"Doctor, I love you. I love you?" "When he put it into words, it felt even more concrete. "I love you."

He put his lips to Orihara's ear and whispered his feelings. Orihara did not answer, but he felt the arms around his neck tighten. I'm sure he loves me, too. The thought made him happy, and made him move his hips faster. The pleasure mounted within him as Kento was swallowed up in the heat of Orihara's body. As he thrust harder and harder, he felt himself reaching his limit. Kento whispered at the man's ear again.

"I want to come. Please, can I?"

Orihara nodded wordlessly, and entwined his legs around Kento's hips. Kento hoisted the man's legs up and plunged deep inside. An almost electric shock of pleasure raced through him.

"Doctor...!" The moment he released himself deep inside the man, he felt something hot splatter on his belly. When he looked down, he saw that Orihara had come as well. Kento traced the white liquid that trailed down both of their bellies with his finger.

"I want to come more. I want you to come more, too." He hoisted Orihara's hips up again, and without even taking a break, he resumed his movements again.

Kent woke in the early morning hours in Orihara's bed. As they lazily reclined on the sofa, weary from their act, the night waned. Orihara had begun to say that he felt cold. Kento remembered moving to the bedroom on the second floor and crawling into bed together.

"Doctor?" He called the man as he pushed himself up, but there was no one in the bedroom. He looked around and saw that he was in a Western-style room about thirty square metres in area. Apart from the bed by the window, there was a wooden bookshelf and desk, and a wardrobe. Both the desk with its stack of medical books and the bookshelf were worn. Kento imagined that they must be artifacts from when Orihara was living here during high school.

I see. So Doctor used to study in this room.

Kento tried waiting a few moments, but there was no sign of Orihara.

"Doctor?" he called again. He heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs, followed by Orihara, who appeared wearing a bathrobe. He passed Kento's clothes to him.

"I've let you stay overnight without permission from your dorm. But the snow has let up now. You can go home by yourself, right?"

"But..."

Orihara remained turned away even as Kento quickly put his clothes on.

"Doctor." Kento touched Orihara's robed shoulder.

"Let's talk about this later," Orihara said, still looking down. "You

have to go to school. You can't be absent from class."

I want to be with you here like this forever, Kento wanted to say, but managed to swallow the words on the tip of his tongue. Even he could tell from Orihara's demeanour that saying so would only add to his troubles.

Is he angry about yesterday? Maybe he was just being bashful. I hope that's what it is.

It was definitely true that he was in love with Orihara. Kento had always imagined that two people, after a night of making love, would spend the next morning savouring their happiness. Of course, he had only seen it happen in TV shows and movies.

But here was Orihara's back to him, sending a clear signal of rejection, which made Kento feel confused. Did that mean that Orihara did not love him back? Or maybe he's disappointed in me. No; that couldn't be true. Orihara had come so many times. He must only be embarrassed. He was moaning so much, after all.

"Alright," Kento agreed. Orihara finally turned to face him. For a while, he looked like he wanted to say something, but instead he sighed and moved towards the wardrobe. He took out a thick coat and draped it over Kento's shoulders.

"It's cold outside. Be careful."

"Doctor...."

Kento knew for sure now that Orihara hadn't come to hate him from what happened yesterday.

"See you later, then," he said brightly, leaving the bedroom. Orihara did not see him to the door.

Kento impatiently waited for classes to end, but when class let out, he and the rest of the students in the dormitory were made to do some volunteer work shoveling the snow that had piled ten centimetres high last night.

They received grateful comments from female-only households and seniors living alone, but Kento was halfhearted at best in his replies as he continued to shovel doggedly.

When the work was finally over, he headed towards Miyashita Clinic, with the coat he had borrowed this morning in hand.

"Doctor!" he called loudly at Orihara, who was still in the consultation room. Orihara was filling in a patient's record at his desk, but smiled at him through his glasses.

"The snow sure piled up last night, didn't it? You must have been cold. I made some coffee, so have it inside."

They were the same kind words as usual, but to Kento they seemed all the more unnatural. He went up to Orihara and looked down at

him.

“Can I kiss you?” he asked.

Orihara blushed furiously and sprung up, peering at Nurse Nakagawa sitting in reception. He took Kento’s hand and hurried to the living room. There, he sighed, sat Kento down on the sofa, and sat across from him on the armchair.

“Kento, I’m sorry. I want you to forget what happened last night,” he said, bowing his head in apology.

“What do you mean? We had sex yesterday. Are you telling me to forget about it?”

Orihara furrowed his brow and looked up with concern at Kento.

“I shouldn’t have done that. I regret it, actually, doing something so immature ? doing something like that with someone who’s too young to even know what it means. I’ve committed a crime.”

His voice was soft, but Kento had never expected to be rejected outright like this. He swallowed his words and glared at Orihara.

“What I did was immoral. I’m really sorry.”

The blood rose to Kento’s head as he cut Orihara off. “I’m not a kid!” he blurted. “I know what we did ? I know what it means. It’s not immoral. I had sex with you because I love you! Isn’t it the same for you?”

Orihara let out a great sigh. “I’m saying that’s what’s immature about you. You’re only sixteen. What you feel towards me isn’t love. It’s what you feel towards an older brother.”

“No!” Kento yelled, cutting him off again. “I know how I feel without you telling me. I want to hear how you feel about me. How do you feel? Didn’t you have sex with me because you liked me?”

Orihara faced him directly, his expression earnest. “Kento, I love you, but it’s like how I would feel towards a little brother. I’m not in love with you. But I let things get carried away. I let it develop into this. I’ll never do it again. I’m sorry. Please forget about it.”

Kento was so caught with disbelief that he had no time to think of a protest. As he sat stunned, Orihara smiled at him.

“Kento, feel free to visit again just like you’ve always done.”

Kento almost wished Orihara had refused to see him anymore and told him never to visit again. Now he knew. Orihara really thought of him as a child, and thought of their sex as nothing but a mistake.

Kento bit his lip. If he put up a fuss now, he would leave an even stronger impression on Orihara that he was a child. In that case, he had better ideas. He vowed he would someday make Orihara acknowledge him as an adult. Until then, he would put on an act.

Kento lifted his face resolutely and smiled back at him.

“I will. I hope you’ll teach me guitar again.”

That night, Kento returned to his room thoroughly depressed, only to find another call was waiting from overseas. It was from his mother in London.

“When does your spring break start?” she asked. “You’re coming down here, aren’t you?”

An idea came to Kento just as his words of refusal were about to leave his mouth.

“Um, I’m actually going to stay here for the spring break. I’ll visit during my exam break instead.” Entrance examinations for junior and senior high schools took place in the latter half of February, and students got a weeklong break. Most students who already attended Shonan for junior high usually got bumped up to senior high without a problem. Excluding those who had failed and had to take a re-test, Kento’s third-year junior high class also had a one-week holiday.

More than anything, Kento wanted to spend the three-week spring break from March to April with Orihara. He wanted to spend time with the man and make him see that he was an adult. Spring break was the perfect opportunity.

“I’ll only be able to visit for a week, but is that okay? I have a lot of things to do to prepare for high school, so I want to stay back for spring break.”

His mother again took his words at face value. “I guess you’re right,” she said. “You’re already going into senior high. I guess I’m in no place to refuse that.”

After confirming the dates of his exam break, she said, “I’ll mail you the airplane tickets,” and hung up the phone. Kento flopped down on his bed and thought. I know. I’ll buy lots of souvenirs to please him. London is a sacred land for Beatles fans. I’ll be able to share more common interests with Orihara.

The next day, Kento told Orihara he was going to London in two weeks.

“My mom keeps nagging me to go. I’ll only be gone for a week, but when spring break rolls around, I’ll come to visit you. Wait for me.”

“The week after next?” Orihara gazed at the calendar on the wall. He was silent for a while, but eventually nodded.

“What do you want me to bring back? Beatles merchandise? Oh, I know, I’ll take a photo on the crossing.”

“Abbey Road,” Orihara smiled. “I can’t wait.”

February in London was still in the midst of winter. Although there was not much snow on the ground, thick clouds covered the sky and the temperature hardly rose during the day. Kento's traveller's guidebook had said it was warmer than Tokyo, which was hard to believe.

"It's especially cold this year," said his mother, Hisae, who had come to pick him up at the airport. She pushed her shivering son into her red Rover Mini.

During the six months that Kento had not seen her, Hisae had highlighted her short hair with green and pink strands. Kento gaped at her in surprise.

"What do you think?" Hisae said proudly. "Makes me look young again, doesn't it?" She wore an outfit of patch-worked jeans and a fleece sweater. Hisae's small stature made it easy for her to be mistaken as a younger woman. Many people believed her off-the-bat when she jokingly introduced Kento as her younger boyfriend. For a while, Kento was fully occupied with the task of correcting her every time.

Hisae worked for an apparel company in a district of London called Camden Town. The company was a startup run by a group of young up-and-coming designers. They designed clothes, hosted fashion shows, and took commissions for patterns.

Hisae's job was in textiles, which involved designing colours and patterns for fabrics. The design studio was a small brick townhouse, with three floors and a half-basement. Contrary to the classical-looking exterior, the interior was outfitted with silver and white in a simple and modern style. The simple interior brought out the vibrant colours of the folklore-style clothes on display.

Many of the workers were young, energetic women, and Kento instantly became the centre of attention. When Hisae proudly informed them that he belonged to a talent agency in Japan, they were not surprised.

"It makes sense. Kento is adorable," they said.

There was a neverending line of older women who offered to take Kento on a tour of London in place of his busy mother. That day, Kento had finished shopping for souvenirs for his friends and was hanging about his mother's workplace when a gaggle of women came to surround him.

"Kento, where do you want to go? The London Eye? Buckingham Palace?"

“What about the British Museum? The Tower of London?”

Kento wasn't interested in any of those.

“I want to walk barefoot across the zebra crossing on Abbey Road.”

The cover of the Beatles' album, named Abbey Road, featured the four members walking across the zebra crossing. Paul was the only one walking across it barefoot, and Kento wanted to imitate him.

When Kento said so, one of the pattern-makers, a huge Beatles fan, widened her eyes.

“Are you a Beatles fan, too?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Wow!” The woman, whose name was Audrey, excitedly took Kento's hands in hers. “The Beatles are the British saints of the twentieth century. Saint Paul, Saint John, Saint George, and Saint Richard.” She winked at him, her red hair in dreadlocks. When Kento effortlessly sung two or three songs for her, she gave him an enraptured smack on the cheek.

“The great thing about the Beatles is that their lyrics are just as good as their music. Their songs are like hymns to me,” she said, playfully crossing herself. Kento chuckled at her exaggerated analogy but went along with her conversation.

“People say that as long as I know Beatles' songs, I have all the English I need.”

“Absolutely. Their songs have everything.”

An ardent Beatles fan, Audrey took Kento around London to visit many locations associated with the Beatles. They got off the tube at Tottenham Court Road Station, and without even batting an eye to the nearby British Museum, they headed for the Soho district.

Located between Regent Street and Bond Street on 3 Savile Row was the headquarters of Apple Records, the record label that brought the Beatles to the rest of the world. The company itself, however, was no longer there.

With a view of Regent Park to their right, they boarded the bus and hurried to Abbey Road. When they arrived at the famous zebra crossing, they already found a group of young men, unsurprisingly, crossing it barefoot despite the cold weather.

“I want to cross, too. Audrey, can you take a picture for me?”

Kento pulled off his sneakers. The cars running along the road seemed accustomed to such behaviours of Beatles fans, and slowed down to stop in front of the crossing.

After safely finishing their photoshoot, Audrey took Kento to the EMI studio nearby. Just the thought of the vast number of albums recorded in this very place made Kento's whole body tremble with awe. Lastly, they visited Madam Tussauds wax museum, where wax sculptures of the four Beatles members were displayed.

“Where’s Penny Lane?” he asked Audrey.

“It’s not here,” she said. “Penny Lane” was the name of another famous Beatles song, and like Abbey Road, was named after a street. But this one was located in Liverpool, a port town where the group grew up. Unfortunately, they didn’t have the time to travel all the way there today.

“Next time, you should bring your friend along. I’ll take you both,” Audrey said. Kento vowed to one day travel to London and Liverpool with Orihara.

When his short trip came to an end, Hisae drove him to Heathrow Airport. She sighed as she watched Kento look at his boarding time in anticipation.

“Kento, you’ve found someone special, haven’t you?”

When Kento blushed in response, Hisae pinched his cheek.

“You know a chick is ready to fly away from its nest when it’s found someone more special than its parents. I guess I should start preparing to let you go, too.”

Within the very same day of his return from London, Kento barged into Miyashita Clinic with his souvenirs. He had only been away for one week, but he ached to see Orihara. To see him, to hear his voice.

The clinic was still open for consultations, but he burst in through the door anyway, fumbling in haste to change his shoes to slippers.

“Welcome home,” said Nurse Nakagawa with a wave from the reception desk.

“I have a souvenir for you, too, Mrs. Nakagawa. Perfume from a store that Princess Diana used to buy from.” Kento gave her a box wrapped in pretty paper. “Where’s the doctor?”

Without even waiting for an answer, he stepped inside.

“Oh?”

The person at the consultation desk was not Orihara. It was a portly elderly gentleman. He looked up from reading a thick medical book, took the glasses off his white head and perched them on his nose as he looked back at Kento.

“You must be Kento, am I right?”

“Where’s Yuri?” Kento was so stunned, he called Orihara by his first name.

“Yuri went back to the university. I’m Miyashita. I’ve come back to work.”

“Gone back...” Kento finally remembered that Orihara had been here as a substitute for his uncle.

“When?”

“Last week.”

That was right after Kento had left to London. What did it all mean? Was his return sudden and unplanned? Kento was rooted to the spot in confusion.

“When was it decided?”

“Didn’t Yuri tell you he was going back to the university? That’s strange. My discharge from the hospital was decided quite a while ago.” Miyashita tilted his head in perplexity.

“I brought souvenirs for Yuri. Where would he be? Would I be able to catch him at N. University?” Kento asked, pretending not to be as agitated as he was.

“He works at N. University Hospital, but he’s not there right now,” Miyashita answered. “He said he’d be relocated to a hospital in Shimizu immediately.”

“Relocated?”

Miyashita explained to him that N. University had several other affiliated hospitals, and medical staff were relocated in turns.

“When is he coming back?”

“Oh, he’ll be away for one or two years at least.”

“No way...” Kento was at a loss for words. Miyashita looked at him with pity and tilted his head again.

“That wasn’t very nice of him to leave without telling you.”

Kento stared at his feet.

“Well, Shimizu is not that far,” Miyashita said encouragingly, “Why not visit him there?”

Why hadn’t Orihara told him? No doubt it was because he didn’t see Kento as a grown man and an equal. Or did he want to write off everything that had happened between them as a mistake? Even what happened that night?

Kento bit his lip and turned away.

“Yuri has told me a lot about you, Kento,” Miyashita gently said behind him. Kento Yamashiro is a precious friend of mine, and he comes here to play guitar because he can’t in his dorm, he had told Miyashita. If he comes when I’m not here, I want you to let him in.

“But...” Being called a precious friend didn’t bring much joy to Kento, who had hoped he would see them as something more.

“Goodbye,” he managed to force from his lips before leaving.

Once he got back to his dorm, Kento crawled into bed and closed his eyes. His buoyant feelings had quickly deflated like a pierced balloon. He had planned to spend a lot of time with Orihara over the spring break. He had wanted to tell Orihara everything he had seen and heard in London.

He must think nothing of me. Fine. If he’s going to give me the cold shoulder, I’ll just forget about him. But there was no way he could. Those gentle hands which had visited him in the night; those

slender fingers pressing the strings of the guitar; his gentle eyes as he nodded and listened to Kento's stories. Every scene appeared vividly before his eyes.

And then, his sad eyes when he had cried in Kento's arms.

I'll never forget you. No matter what happens.

By the second day, Kento was already dying to play guitar again. He had second thoughts about going back since he had left the clinic rather angrily, but his desire to play guitar won out. Somehow, it felt like playing the guitar would keep his connection to Orihara alive.

After school, he visited Miyashita Clinic and shyly poked his face into the consultation room.

"Good to see you," Miyashita greeted him with a smile. "Play to your heart's content. I'm quite enjoying this, too. I feel like I've gotten myself a grandson."

Kento played the guitar in the living room just as he had with Orihara, and the memories of the man's voice, expression, and body language all came flashing back to him. He used his pick to strum the strings while he sang "All My Loving" in a quiet voice.

"You know, Kento, real Beatles fans purposely play this part wrong." The gentle voice resonated deep in his ears.

"Why's that, Doctor?"

Orihara had smiled at his question. "This song's in their second album, called *With the Beatles*. There's a mistake in the recording."

Then, Orihara had leaned over his shoulder from behind him, their cheeks almost brushed up against each other.

"Do it like... this. Yes, very good."

He remembered staring at Orihara's profile and his pronounced features, feeling a strange pain in his heart that he did not understand. No doubt by that time, he had already begun to be attracted to Orihara. Back then, they had only been nebulous feelings of affection. If he had known what they meant... he could have turned around and touched those lips. On one occasion, in fact, he had turned around too quickly and bumped lips with Orihara.

"Whoa, sorry for kissing you," Kento had apologized in a flustered way. Even then, Orihara had only smiled and forgiven him.

And he gently poised his fingers over mine and taught me. Kento was almost sure that Orihara had feelings for him. I'm sure he loves me even a little. After all, he hadn't gotten angry when their lips touched by mistake. If he had hated Kento, he would probably have reacted with disgust.

That's right. And we've done way more than kissing. He said afterwards that he'd gotten carried away, but no matter how carried

away he got, he'd never be able to do that with someone he hated. It wasn't a spur-of-the-moment thing. I really do love him.

He was sure that Orihara loved him back, even just slightly. Perhaps they were not romantic feelings, but even that was enough.

And then while I'm away
I'll write home every day
And I'll send all my loving to you

He thought of Orihara as he sang. It was a while before he realized that Miyashita was listening intently beside him.

"It's been such a long time since I heard the guitar," he said with awe.

"Why's that?"

"Yuri also quit playing guitar when he quit running." Miyashita gave a grunt as he lowered himself into the armchair in front of Kento, and gazed at Kento with a reminiscent look.

"I'm surprised he even taught you the guitar."

"Uh-huh."

After playing a few more songs, a thought popped up in Kento's mind. What if he asked Miyashita about Orihara? He was Orihara's uncle after all, and they had even lived together. Kento didn't want to seem nosy by abruptly bombarding him with questions, so he decided to get close with Miyashita first.

"Dr. Miyashita, do you mind if I start coming here all the time again?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Not a problem. Come anytime," Miyashita said.

Miyashita was very fond of music, and he and Kento soon grew close over the course of his visits. However, all the vinyl records that Miyashita owned were classical, apart from Orihara's Beatles records. Kento suggested that he listen to other music as well.

"I'll lend you some CDs," he offered. Miyashita did not own a CD player, so Kento brought in his own stereo from his dorm. "I have another one back in my room, so you can keep this here," he assured the man.

Kento thought long and hard before choosing a Southern All Stars album, thinking it would probably be palatable for someone who was familiar with The Beatles.

"I think you'll find this music alright," he said as he pressed play. Miyashita appeared to bode well with the ballads.

"I want to hear more," he said. Kento decided to lend him another

CD.

"Is this one Southern All Stars, too?" Miyashita asked.

"You should listen to different stuff," Kento advised. "You'll get behind the times if you don't listen this type of music."

Miyashita adjusted well to J-pop. "This 'Love Machine' song is quite energizing," he said as he sat on the sofa with headphones on, bobbing his plump body back and forth. Kento almost burst out laughing.

"Right? It feels even better to sing it," Kento said. "We should go karaoke sometime!"

The incident happened one Sunday after Kento had started spring break. He was eating an early dinner with Miyashita when Nurse Nakagawa came back to visit after taking Saturday off.

"I just got back," she said, taking a large box out. When they asked, she told them she had gone on a family trip to Hakone.

"Where did you stay?"

"At F Hotel." The historical luxury hotel was a mix of East and West; it looked like a Japanese temple or shrine on the outside, but the rooms were outfitted in Western style.

"I remember you telling me that the apple pie here was amazing, Doctor, so I brought some back as a souvenir."

"That's where John Lennon and Yoko Ono stayed, right?" Kento said, showing off the knowledge that he had gotten from Orihara. Nakagawa nodded and said she had gotten to see the hotel guestbook.

"Apparently, so did Helen Keller and Charlie Chaplin," she added.

After dinner, Kento decided it was a good time for them to tuck into the souvenir. He made some tea and called Miyashita over from the living room, where he was reading a book.

"It's been such a long time since I had apple pie from here." Miyashita took a bite as soon as he sat down at the table. "Delicious," he hummed. "All of us went there together once, when Yuri was still young. But we haven't gone back since."

"A family trip? Was his older brother there, too?"

Miyashita gave him a quizzical look. "Of course," he said.

"Well, weren't Yuri and his brother having trouble getting along?" Orihara's older brother had been on his mind, and Kento decided to ask about it. "One night when I was here watching the house while he was gone, his older brother called and told me Yuri always pretends to be out."

Miyashita sighed. "I'm only telling this to you because it's you. Yuri and his brother, Keigo, are not related by blood."

"He's not Yuri's real brother?"

Miyashita grunted somewhat reluctantly. "I guess I should give you the whole story," he said finally, and began his explanation. "Yuri's mother is my younger sister."

He had already heard this from Orihara, so Kento nodded his head.

"My sister and her husband couldn't have children for a long time. So, about ten years into their marriage, they adopted."

The adopted son had been Keigo, Yuri's older brother.

"Did they adopt him from an orphanage? Because they needed someone to take after the hospital?"

Miyashita laughed. "This isn't the nineteenth century! And this isn't some cheap soap opera. My sister and her husband just really loved children. That's all."

Miyashita's younger sister and her husband cherished Keigo and raised him with care. Then, in the year that Keigo was set to enter a prestigious middle school, it had happened.

"By some incredible stroke of luck, she got pregnant."

Of course, even after Yuri was born, the two loved him and Keigo equally. Keigo himself had been adopted at three and so had no memories of his infancy. He loved his foster parents like he would his own. Although Yuri and Keigo were far apart in age, they had been very close.

"Yuri followed Keigo around everywhere. They were almost joined at the hip."

Kento remembered the conversation that Yuri and his brother had over the phone and found it hard to believe that they got along.

"Then why..."

Miyashita took another bite of apple pie, then took a gulp of tea before continuing his story.

"Yuri found out the truth by accident when their grandfather died."

At a gathering for the Buddhist Forty-Ninth Day memorial ceremony, Yuri had overheard his distant relatives talking to the mothers.

"You'll leave the hospital to your biological child, I presume?"

"You gave birth to Yuri yourself, so you must feel more attached to him."

In this way, Yuri's relatives had pressed his mother, and Yuri had overheard it all.

"Keigo was already twenty-two and in medical school, so...."

Although his parents had had no intentions of forcing him to take over the hospital, Keigo's intelligence had already begun to lead him down the path of medicine.

A change overcame Yuri after that incident. He abruptly stopped talking about becoming a doctor like the brother he respected so

much, and he never spoke of it again. Instead, he began to throw himself into exercise.

Yuri was long-limbed and nimble. His talent blossomed on the track and in the pits, in sports such as high-jumping and hurdles. His family, although perplexed by the sudden change, supported Yuri's endeavours when he began appearing at tournaments.

At first, neither Yuri's parents nor Miyashita had any idea what had made Yuri change his prospects.

"By choosing a completely different path, he planned to have the hospital pass naturally into his brother's hands."

Kento remembered again how his brother had said over the phone that Yuri was acting out of guilt towards him.

"And?"

"When it came time to take high-school entrance exams, Yuri chose the Athletic stream, and that's how he came to stay at my house."

At the time, Miyashita had just lost his wife to illness. He warmly welcomed Yuri as a distraction from his sadness.

"But he injured his leg and couldn't do sports anymore, right?" Kento butted in. Miyashita gave him a confused look.

"Hmm? He did hurt his leg, but it wasn't so bad that he had to stop sports."

"What?" Kento exclaimed this time. "Wasn't he hospitalized?" He was sure Orihara had said so. Kento rifled through his memories.

"No, the one who was hospitalized was a friend he was training with. Yuri was depressed about it, though, and said it was his fault."

This was totally different from the story he had heard. Miyashita continued his story, oblivious to the tense expression on Kento's face.

"Anyway, in his third year of high school, Yuri suddenly announced that he was aiming to get into the faculty of medicine. My sister and her husband were overjoyed, and naturally, I thought it was a good thing."

Yuri was intelligent enough, and after a year of furious studying he was admitted to the faculty of medicine at N. University.

But a while after entering university, he had declared that he was not going to take over the family business and was never going to go back to his hometown.

"His family was shocked." That was when they had realized for the first time that Yuri knew that his older brother was adopted.

"By then Keigo was already married and had taken over at the family hospital. When he found out that Yuri was suffering because of that, he was astonished."

He asked Yuri over and over to come back once he had become a doctor, and that Keigo would withdraw to make way for him.

"But Yuri is more stubborn than he looks." Miyashita sighed.

“He’s... how do I say this? He’s prone to jumping to conclusions. I’m quite worried.”

He then looked at Kento with renewed intrigue. “I’m glad that a cheerful boy like you has become his friend. I know there’s an age difference, but I’d really appreciate if you could continue to be his friend.”

But he sees me as a kid, Kento said inwardly. He never told me anything that was important to him.

If that wasn’t proof that Orihara saw him as a child, he didn’t know what was.

“See you tomorrow,” Kento said as he stepped outside to go home. The sun was setting as the spring day came to an end, and the area was washed in a dark-blue light similar to Lake Titicaca from those faraway days.

Feeling a warmth in the air like that of a human touch, Kento let his eyes wander up to the sky and its lingering light. In the neighboring yard was a towering cherry blossom tree, and a crescent moon hung on a branch with swelling buds.

As he began his slow walk to the dorm’s back entrance, Kento recalled the nights he had listened to records with Orihara.

“Kento, let’s practice your English. You know this phrase, ‘C Moon’? Do you know what it is?” Orihara smiled as he pointed at the cover.

“C Moon? No idea.”

“It means crescent moon.”

Kento looked up at Orihara from where he was lying on his stomach on the sofa with his cheek propped up in one hand.

“Oh, because it looks like the letter C!” he said in realization, and stared at Yuri in amazement. “So, is a half-moon a D moon?”

Orihara laughed as he shook his head. “No, that’s just called a half-moon. Obvious, though, right?”

Doctor. Kento felt a tear roll down his cheek. It was a tear of frustration, he thought. He was frustrated that he was still a boy. Yes ? today, he had been slapped in the face with the fact that he was still a child.

Orihara had not told him a single important thing. But even if he had, Kento would probably not have been able to help him.

Kento’s original plan had been to visit Orihara at the hospital where he worked once spring break started. He had planned to convince the man that he really loved him. But in doing so, he would only be a kid causing trouble for Orihara.

Orihara had said that it was his fault that people were unhappy.

“Everyone” probably meant his older brother, Keigo, and his injured friend. That was why Orihara had left his home behind and stopped running.

Right at that moment, everything clicked. Kento bit his lip. His mother had said it once: that your time for leaving the nest came when you found someone more important than your family.

Right now, Kento did have someone who was more important than anyone, someone whom he wanted to protect more than anyone else. But he did not have the strength to do so. The wings on his back were still small, barely strong enough to support his own weight.

He had wished every day to grow up faster ? ever since the day Orihara had left him. He had felt like if he wished hard enough, it would happen instantly. But of course, that was impossible. Kento realized for the first time that there were some things he could simply never have, no matter how hard he wished.

Becoming an adult meant being able to protect your loved one. Kento wanted to be by Orihara’s side and to protect him. He wanted to make Orihara happy.

But even if he went to Orihara now, he would be able to do nothing. And Orihara would never acknowledge him as an adult. Kento stopped in his tracks and looked up at the crescent moon.

“It’s called a C Moon.”

He remembered Orihara’s smiling face.

“I’ll keep moving forward on my own,” Kento murmured. “Watch me, Doctor.”

Right now, all he could do was to learn how to walk on his own, without anyone’s help. To do that, he needed to heal his leg, study, and go to school. It seemed like an awfully roundabout path, but there was nothing he could do. There was no shortcut.

Orihara was someone whom he needed in his life, someone who meant more than anything else. That was all the more reason why he needed to become independent, in a place far away from him. That was the only thing he could do right now.

Once more, Kento looked up at the moon. Perhaps Orihara was out there looking at it, too.

“Wait for me,” he said to it, “I’ll get there someday.”

Kento went on to senior high school. The curriculums branched off widely at this level, and each of the General, Athletic, and Performing Arts streams had unique class content.

Not all students in Performing Arts aspired to be celebrity personalities; many students aimed to get into music school after graduating.

The Athletics stream benefited from the school's location in the suburbs, with two fields exclusively for the use of the department. Shonan Private School was full of talented students who had been scouted from all over the country to be on the track-and-field and baseball teams. The object was, of course, garnering N. University's preferred admission spots.

N. University's baseball team was part of the Eastern Metropolitan Varsity League, and N. University's track team had also competed for the past few years in the Hakone Ekiden marathon.

Kento was interested in the track team that Orihara had been a part of, and so went to visit the grounds to watch them practice.

"So this is where he used to run, huh." Kento sat perched atop a slightly raised dirt slope for spectators, watching the team members in shorts running around the track. He remembered that night, and those long and slender limbs which had wound around him, and gave himself a stern knock on the head for his naughty thoughts.

"Me and my dirty mind," he muttered to himself in exasperation.

The coach began to notice Kento after he kept showing up several times to watch them practice. The coach was now in his fifties, but in his younger days he had also run the Hakone Ekiden marathon. Over the years, however, he had developed a considerable gut. His bearded face and hairy arms was reminiscent of a rambunctious bear.

At first he mistakenly thought Kento was watching because he wanted to join the track team. He extended an invitation, but when Kento showed him the support on his knee, he looked disappointed.

"It's a shame. You've got the physique for it. And you look good. You'd be the perfect star on the track."

When Kento told him that he was part of the Performing Arts department and that he was signed with a talent agency, the coach didn't seem surprised.

"I could see that, with your looks," he remarked. "You're pretty much a star already."

Kento and the coach got along well. One day, on a whim, Kento decided to ask him something.

“Do you still have members’ lists from past years?”

“Yeah, they’re in the club room,” the coach said.

“My friend used to be a member of this team. Can I have a look at it, for memories’ sake?” Kento asked.

Club rooms were located on the second floor of the equipment storage building behind the gym. The coach invited Kento to come with him.

The forty-square-metre room was occupied by a large desk, a few collapsible chairs, and two filing cabinets. Many trophies sat atop them. The coach hauled out thick binders with black covers that looked like accounting books.

“How many years ago are we looking at?”

“Um...”

When Kento told him, the coach flipped through the pages as he talked.

“I hadn’t joined yet that year. I guess that’d be about three generations ago. That’s a pretty old friend you’ve got,” he commented. When he found the page, Kento studied it intently.

“All newly-joined members should be in Japanese alphabetical order.”

Kento glanced up near the top of the page, and scanned the names in order.

“There he is!” There it was. Yuri Orihara. Kento felt choked up as he continued to stare at the name. “Doctor...”

He felt like he had gone back in time to meet a high-school Orihara. If only he had a time machine, he could go back to Orihara in those days and support him when he was hurt. Perhaps it would be hard to be lovers, but at least he would be able to support him as a friend of the same age.

He remembered the sadness etched in Orihara’s face, and felt a stinging in the back of his nose.

“Kid?” the coach asked uncertainly. Kento had been staring at the same spot on the page for so long that the man had gotten concerned.

“Oh, uh, it’s nothing. Thank you for everything!” Kento said brightly, bowing his head in thanks. “Would you mind if I visited again?”

“Not at all. Come anytime.”

Kento left the room and headed for the woods near the back gates. Here was where he had seen Orihara two days after receiving news of his knee condition. The coloured leaves had been falling then, but now they were replaced by vivid new greenery.

He felt like it had happened years ago, but it had only been two

months since they parted ways. But I still feel so lonely. Even seeing his name makes me want to cry. I can't be like this. I have to be stronger, Kento scolded himself.

Yes. Remember that line: "I want to give myself a word of praise." They were the famous words of a marathon medalist. Until he could say those same words proudly, he had to keep trying. Or else, there was no way he could protect the person he loved.

Far away, he could see a club member diligently running around the track alone. The sight of the runner all alone reminded Kento of Orihara, who shut out those around him to keep the hurt inside himself. Kento watched him carefully.

The runner's head was prone to drooping, but he had a powerful pace, and once in a while his spikes kicked up the dust around him. But Kento was too far away to hear his breathing or his footsteps.

Silence lay thick between them, it didn't feel at all like they were living in the same moment. Kento was overcome with a mysterious sense that he was looking at Orihara as a high-schooler running around the track through a wall of time that divided them.

As he stood stock-still, suddenly a burst of cheering from the baseball field reached his ears on the warm breeze. Kento was brought back to the present. And then, on sure footing he headed for the dormitory. Although he could see Orihara close to him, he could not reach out to touch him ? just like those track runners practicing on the field. But that was only for the present time; some day in the future, he would tear down that wall dividing them with the sheer strength of his resolve.

Kento vowed that until that dream was fulfilled, he would never look back again.

The start of the new academic year brought new students into the dorms as well as into the classrooms. However, Kento and Tomoya still occupied the same room as before. Tomoya, of course, had gone into the same Performing Arts stream as Kento did.

An advantage of being in Performing Arts was being able to count work activities as credits towards the overall program. The only required classwork was a report. Tomoya used the system to his best advantage and poured his energies into his work.

Chronos remained active on the music scene after their first show during the winter holidays, releasing three consecutive singles. The band was kept busy, and even Kento did not see much of Tomoya anymore, despite being roommates with him.

But Kento was no longer in a panic over the future. Right now, his primary goal was not to debut or to dance, but to become

independent.

Kento's enrolment into the Performing Arts stream meant he was permitted to use the soundproofed practice rooms on school property. Kento got permission from Miyashita to take home the guitar that he had gotten from Orihara. He faithfully attended class, and used his spare time to practice singing and guitar, and to read books.

Kento was also given more elective courses this year. He decided to take a few courses on music composition and lyric-writing. Writing a song for Orihara that conveyed his feelings became an enjoyable activity.

Someday, he wanted to accompany this song with his guitar, and get it across to Orihara somehow ? yes, like John and Paul did.

It was still April, but Chronos and Tomoya were busy preparing for the nationwide tour kicking off during the summer holidays. Tomoya seemed to be at the agency on every day off. But whenever they did bump into each other, Tomoya still gave him tapes of their new songs and taught him new dance moves.

"Kento, make sure you keep practicing," Tomoya always said.

Many of Chronos' songs fell under the category of Eurobeats and electronic dance music ? energetic and energizing. One day, Tomoya presented him with a demo tape of Chronos' new song. This was to be their fourth single. For once this weekend, Tomoya was free of engagements, so he and Kento decided to flop down on the bed and listen to the new song together.

"I wish I could dance to this song," Kento said. Tomoya's face lit up.

"I wish I could see you dance again," he said.

Kento pulled out his guitar and played along with the song a little. He strummed his way along with the pick for a while, but gave up and took the strap off.

"I can't play it. It would have to be a ballad or something."

"Kento, since when can you play guitar?" Tomoya's eyes were wide with surprise.

"I practiced because I had some time on my hands."

"I heard you're taking a composition course, too? That's so cool." Tomoya propped his chin on his hands and looked at Kento enviously.

Kento couldn't help but burst out laughing at Tomoya repeating how jealous he was.

"What're you talking about?" he responded. "You're part of Chronos, the heartthrob band of the century. You're way cooler."

"No," Tomoya protested. "You're tall, and you're still so nice to me even after you've gotten injured, and you're challenging yourself with all these new things other than dance... you're so mature."

Kento smiled, happy to be called mature. Did that mean he had

grown up a little?

“I didn’t do it on my own.” He decided to tell everything to Tomoya. “Our school doctor, Dr. Orihara, was the one who supported me all the way. Actually, he’s still behind my motivation right now.”

Even though they were apart, Orihara’s existence was still a driving force for Kento.

Once July rolled around and the term-end exams passed, Kento visited Miyashita Clinic for the first time in a long while. Miyashita began by examining his leg.

“Let’s take an X-ray,” he said. He immediately developed the photo and hung it on the light box beside the photo that Orihara had taken before.

“Kento, I think you can start getting back into your routine again. Your knee has gotten much better!”

“What, really?” Kento literally jumped up from the stool, where he had been sitting gravely moments before.

“Yes. But before you start dancing again, I suggest you start swimming first to gain back some muscle. Keep your support on. It’ll also help stretch your body,” Miyashita said as he examined Kento’s knee again. “Osgood-Schlatter disease puts stress on your bones when you bend and stretch. If you’re in the water, you’ll have buoyancy on your side. You should keep your support on so that you don’t bend your knee too much, too quickly.”

Kento was filled with disbelief at first, since he had heard before it would take a year for him to recover.

“Are you sure? Am I really better now?”

Miyashita clapped Kento on the shoulder. “You followed doctor’s orders and endured. It paid off.”

No, Kento inwardly shook his head. This was thanks to Orihara. If Orihara hadn’t found the disease in the first place ?if he hadn’t encouraged him, then everything would have turned out differently.

“Thank you, Doctor,” Kento said clearly, looking Miyashita straight in the eye.

Over the summer, Kento went to the pool regularly to recover his muscular strength. During his exercise ban, Kento had trained with a chest expander to condition his upper body. His abdominal breathing practice had also expanded his thorax, which enabled him to improve rapidly in swimming.

Just once, he sent out a postcard addressed to the medical office of the hospital that Orihara worked at.

He wrote a single line, just mentioning how he had recovered enough to start exercising again. After some indecision, he decided to

attach lyrics from a Beatles song. He had actually wanted to attach a poem he had written himself, but he wasn't confident enough for that yet.

He debated about which lyrics to use, and ended up choosing "All My Loving."

While I'm away
I'll write home every day
And I'll send all my loving to you

Kento felt that these lyrics mostly accurately described what he felt in his heart.

The summer holidays were now numbered to its last days. One day, Kento visited Sion Promotions to do some voice training. His trainer, Hamanishi, took him to a practice studio with instruments instead of their usual practice room.

The studio was usually for practice but was nonetheless well-equipped enough to do demo tape recordings. In a corner was a glass-panelled mixing room.

Kento went inside to find that Managing Director Mori, Manager Shimoda, and a number of staff were already present inside the mixing booth. Kento froze up at seeing so many senior company executives. Manager Shimoda came over to him and passed him a few sheets of notation.

"Do you think you can sing a bit for us?"

It was Chronos' song, one that Kento had practiced quite thoroughly. He put on a pair of headphones and sang along to the music that streamed through them. Mori watched him steadily from inside the booth.

Once Kento finished singing, Shimoda spoke to him from the microphone in the booth.

“Can you listen to this?” he asked. Kento put his headphones on again and heard a slow instrumental song. It was a song he’d never heard before. He listened intently, tapping a beat with his foot.

“What do you think?” Mori asked.

“It’s good. The chord progressions remind me of ‘Michelle’ by The Beatles,” Kento answered. Mori looked astonished.

“These are the lyrics,” Shimoda said as he came in and passed him notations. Kento opened the sheet music up and let his eyes sweep over them.

“This...” He was at a loss for words.

You said so once
With time
I would forget about you
The songs I sang with you, the scenes we saw together
The guitar your hands ran over
Everything reminds me of you
They remind me of you every time
My love will last
I know it will, all through my life
Longing for you with all my lovin’
I’ll gather the fragments of the times we spent together
And put it all in a sandglass
If I turn it over in my heart
I know it’ll turn back to the times we spent together
Turn it over
Over and over
Over and over again

“I wrote these words...”

Mori spoke to him over the microphone. “I heard from Tomoya that you were writing lyrics. When I told him I wanted to take a look, he sneaked them out for me.”

Kento felt his cheeks flush. “Tomoya,” he growled. “I never asked him to!” But gnashing his teeth over it now wasn’t going to do any good.

“So? Don’t you think it goes well with this music?” Mori’s soft voice flowed through to him. “Chronos has been releasing only upbeat dance music until now. We were thinking of adding a ballad in their first album, and we thought this was perfect. We can promote the fact that Chronos’ newest member wrote the lyrics himself. It would be a newsworthy material.”

Kento almost missed the meaning of what Mori said.

“Wait, Mr. Mori, what did you just say?”

“I said Chronos’ newest member. I’m talking about you.”

Kento’s mouth hung open as he stared at Mori inside the booth.

“Wait, so was that an audition just now?”

Before he knew it, the other three members of Chronos had come in through the open studio door and were standing behind Kento.

“Welcome to the group,” said Oka, the leader, gripping Kento’s hand.

“Nice to have you,” Nishimura said brusquely, turning to the wall.

Tomoya stood on his toes and whispered into Kento’s ear. “You were supposed to be a member from the beginning. Your knee injury just delayed things a little bit. I overheard,” he added.

“That’s why...” That’s why he had given Kento their new song and told him he should learn it. He was truly thankful for that.

Unfortunately, Tomoya’s effort at discretion backfired.

“I heard that. That’s off the record,” Mori said, laughing as he made an “X” sign with his index fingers. The sound-collecting microphone at Kento’s mouth had apparently caught everything.

“Whatever the case, I think this ballad is good,” Nishimura said shortly again. “You’ve got talent.” He gave Kento a thump on the back. It appeared to be Nishimura’s way of acknowledging him as a member.

Kento snapped up, his back straight as a board. “I have a lot to learn, but I hope you’ll treat me kindly,” he said, and bent his body at exactly ninety-degrees in a formal bow. After split-second pause, a burst of laughter erupted both in the recording booth and outside of it.

...I'll send all my loving to you.

Kento finished singing. The vibration of the guitar strings gradually died down and disappeared into the silence of the studio. The MC, Tawara, snapped out of his trance and began to clap.

"There you had it! 'All My Loving' sung by Kento Yamashiro!" He then looked at the other MC, Matsukawa. "Well, Matsukawa? What did you think of his guitar?"

"It was goof," Matsukawa said, raising one thick thumb.

"Whoa, Kento, did you see that? You got approval from the Matsukawa!"

Kento sensed Matsukawa staring at him, looking like he wanted to say something. But instead, he silently bowed his head and took the guitar strap off his shoulder.

"Alright, then, let's hear about the song we're going to hear today in the studio!"

"Our first album goes on sale in March," Oka said as the leader, looking at the camera. "This is one of its songs, and it placed tenth on the Oricon billboard charts. 'What Love Is'. Enjoy."

The song was already a pre-recorded video which would be edited in before the show went on air. Once Oka finished introducing the song, the assistant director flashed a board from where he was squatting on the ground. Wrap up, it said.

"So there you had it, this week's MVG, Chronos!" Tawara said when he saw the sign. He raised his hands and went into wrapping up the show. "So, all the good boys and girls out there, and the naughty ones too, and all the gramps and grans watching this show at home, see you all next week!" he said, garnering laughs with his comical attitude.

"Same channel, same time!" Matsukawa, with his contrasting rugged look, pointed at a thick index finger straight at the camera and pretended to shoot a pistol. It was Music Map's classic close. The ending song faded out.

"That's a wrap! Good work, everyone!"

The scorching lights went out at once.

The group of four, including Kento, heaved a great sigh.

"I was sweating like mad from nerves!" Oka stood up and bowed his head to Matsukawa. "Thank you for everything. Alright, guys, let's get out of their way."

Kento got to his feet before Matsukawa stopped him.

"You hold on a minute," he said. When Kento turned around,

Matsukawa was looking at him with penetrating eyes. "I caught that. I'm not a Beatles fanatic for nothing. You messed up that spot on purpose, didn't you?"

"Yes," Kento nodded honestly. Matsukawa approached him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "You learned that from that person you love, too?"

"Yes."

"You must really love that person."

"I do."

Matsukawa nudged Kento's shoulders with both hands and scratched his head fiercely. "I'll get them to air that part without cutting it. I hope she gets your message. I'll be cheering for you."

"Thank you."

Kento lapsed into thought as he watched Matsukawa's retreating back as he strode away. He thought of when he had just started learning Beatles songs when he had gotten good enough on the guitar. He had been practicing 'All My Loving' when Orihara told him that there was a playing mistake recorded on the LP.

"That's why real Beatles fans make a mistake on purpose here, to copy Paul." Orihara's smiling face rose in his mind.

I haven't forgotten about you.

If Orihara were to see this show on air?if he were to see Kento play his guitar?would he get Kento's message? He didn't know. But Kento was prepared to bet on the small possibility that he would.

After the recording, the group found Manager Shimoda waiting for them in the dressing room.

"Time to head out for the office. We have a meeting to get to," he said.

"Aww, already?" Tomoya complained. "I was gonna go to Kagurazaka to buy a green-tea Bavarois while we were in the area!"

Oka laughed as he pulled out his Nike backpack. "I bought souvenirs, so you'll have to settle with these."

"Yay!" Tomoya cheered.

In the car, Shimoda began talking about plans for a TV special during the Golden Week holidays in May. The sports-themed special was to be aired on Children's Day on May 5 at the National Stadium, where stars competed against each other in different sports.

"And we get to be on that show?" Tomoya leaned forward eagerly, but Manager Shimoda shook his head.

"Nishimura is the only one from Chronos who's entering the competition. I have something else planned for the rest of the group." After mentioning that they would officially be assigned their roles

later on, Manager Shimoda specifically pointed Kento out.

“We’ve already decided on the perfect spot for you,” he said. It was a feature that was going to be played between competitions that got up-close and personal with athletes aspiring to enter the Paralympics.

“Everyone knows that your debut was delayed because of your leg injury. That’s why we thought it’d be perfect for you to be a reporter.”

“But my injury wasn’t that serious,” Kento protested. “Are you sure I’m fit for this part?”

“Well, I know you might not like it because it seems like we’re cashing in on it, but...”

“Then why do I?”

“You’ve debuted now,” Oka interrupted. “You’re going to have to do a lot of things. This will be a good experience.” Oka had gotten signed with the agency before any of the four members, and had a wealth of experience in the entertainment industry. His argument stood firm, and Kento had no choice but to agree.

“You know, I’ve had to wear gorilla masks and rabbit suits before,” Oka said ruefully, which made everyone roar with laughter.

Kento’s reporting work took place during the spring holidays. As he met and spoke with a number of athletes aiming for the Paralympics, Kento began to realize that he had had the wrong idea all along. For these people, sports was much more than a casual hobby to engage in after conquering their injuries or disabilities. These were real athletes in a competitive world, with everything on the line.

They conditioned their bodies for maximum performance, and had the skills and ideas to make full use of their capabilities. At the very end of his project, Kento met a certain man.

He was a triathlon athlete with a prosthetic leg who lived in the Shikoku region and also a software developer for a medical equipment manufacturer. The venture company not only manufactured CT and MRI scanners, but was also active in developing prosthetic legs and nursing robots for those with cervical spine injuries.

The company had a large factory and research institute in Kochi, and the man, named Ishizaka, worked at the research institute.

One day during the spring holidays, Kento and the TV crew visited the research institute. Despite the intimidating image that came from the “research institute” name, the facility was in fact a large open space like a gymnasium with an array of training machines connected to computers for analysis. It looked like a gym that one would find around town.

Ishizaka was running on a treadmill with his prosthetic leg. Various wires were attached to every part of his body. His skin was

tanned from the sun and his hair was cropped short. His sharp face and thick eyebrows made him look like a rugged actor. Muscles bulged in every part of his body, and his thighs were taut.

From the knee-down on his right leg, he was wearing a strangely-shaped prosthetic leg. The knee consisted of a metal rotor, and the shin looked like it was made from thin, flexible plastic. The ankle was a metal spring.

A few researchers were clustered around the monitor, staring intently at it. After fifteen minutes or so of running, Ishizaka stopped and beckoned to Kento and the staff.

“This is called an electromyogram. It tells you which muscles contract when I run.” He explained the jagged slopes on the monitor that looked like a seismic reading. “My body becomes the research subject. I contribute the data myself so we can make better prosthetic legs,” he said.

Triathlons involved swimming, running, and bicycling, which required different prosthetic legs for each. Ishizaka sat down on a nearby chair and took off his prosthetic leg to show Kento. His real right leg was amputated from the mid-thigh downwards. Kento stared unflinchingly at his leg. Then, he touched the prosthetic leg lying beside it.

“This must be an artificial joint that works in place of your knee. And instead of a hinge, you use a rotor ? that’s a good idea. When you land, this spring absorbs the shock. That’s pretty amazing,” he said, impressed. “This is an amazing leg!”

Ishizaka looked at Kento with surprise. “You’re pretty honest with your reactions, aren’t you?” he said loudly. “As long as you’re not afraid to speak your mind, you can be assured there are no barriers between you and me. To tell you the truth, I didn’t think much about you idol singers, but it looks like I was the one discriminating.” He grinned, rolling his big eyes.

“I really am impressed,” Kento said earnestly. “I hurt my knee and was told I couldn’t exercise for a year. That’s when I learned about the knee joint from my doctor.”

Yes, Orihara had explained in detail to him, using an anatomical chart, just how complex and well the knee functioned, despite how simple the structure looked at first glance.

“Until then, I didn’t know. I thought all the knee did was bend.”

“That’s right,” Ishizaka said. He proudly lifted his prosthetic leg. “Someday I’ll make a knee more magnificent than the one God made. My ambition is to make a knee so great that when an athlete enters a competition with it, he’d make all the non-disabled people jealous.”

After their filming segment was finished, Kento walked around looking at the computers and training machines. Ishizaka came over to talk to him.

“So I heard you’re going to the same school I used to go to.”

“My school?”

Ishizaka jerked a thumb at the staff, who were busy carrying cameras, microphones, and other filming equipment on their shoulders.

“I just heard. You’re from Shonan Senior High? I used to be in the Athletics department there. I was on the track team.”

“What?” Something familiar sparked in Kento’s head. But the man in front of him looked much older than Orihara. He recalled the list of new members he had looked at in the club room. He had been too occupied with Orihara’s name at the time, but he said alphabetical order, right? If he remembered correctly, didn’t the name that came after Orihara start with “Ishi”?

Even if they didn’t join the team at the same time, if they were fellow members, it was possible that they knew each other’s names, at least. Kento grabbed Ishizaka’s arm.

“Do you know a Yuri Orihara?” he asked hoarsely. Ishizaka’s thick eyebrows shot up.

When Kento told the TV crew that he would be having dinner with Ishizaka, they sent him off willingly. Perhaps they had figured that they could enjoy their celebratory drinking party more freely without a minor like Kento around. Ishizaka took him to a restaurant that served Sawachi style cuisine, a Kochi specialty.

The restaurant was located inside a multi-storey building, but the interior was decorated to look like a rural house with a thatched roof. Beams carved out of whole trees spanned across the ceiling.

“Apparently they dismantled a hundred-year-old house and rebuilt it here.”

“Wow, it looks like a filming set.”

Ishizaka burst into laughter. “You sound just like someone in the entertainment business.”

Among the restaurant guests were businessmen as well as younger people who looked like tourists. Ishizaka made for a seat close to a group of young college-age women. Kento hastily tugged at Ishizaka’s jacket.

“Oh, right. I almost forgot you were a celebrity.” Ishizaka asked a server in a happi coat for a private booth. The booth had a wood-panel floor and a sunken hearth, with rattan floor cushions placed around it. Once they sat down, trays were brought in front of them

with appetizers. Ishizaka gave his order to the server.

“I know you’re a minor, but you can still drink beer, right?”

“No, I can’t.” Those were the rules at his management office. Ishizaka shrugged at Kento’s staunch refusal.

“Well, I guess no means no. You’re a pop icon, after all.” He ordered one Japanese sake instead.

A big platter arrived with servings of seared bonito and sashimi.

“Eat,” Ishizaka encouraged. “You’re a growing young man.” He then drank his sake as he began his story.

“Both Orihara and I weren’t sprinters. We were long-distance runners.” Ishizaka was born in Kochi, but had been granted a scholarship for his performance in junior high school and had moved into a dorm for senior high. He was a ten-kilometre race runner, and his most immediate goal was the inter-high-school championships. He eventually wanted to enter the senior high-school Ekiden relay race, and finally, as a matter of course, the Hakone Ekiden relay race once he entered university.

During autumn of their second year, Orihara and a few other runners accidentally tripped over one another and ended up falling. That was when Orihara hurt a ligament in his knee.

“The injury itself wasn’t serious, but he was worried that he wouldn’t make the cut for the high-school Ekiden race. So he trained in secret without telling the coach.”

Ishizaka had been worried about Orihara running on the roads alone at night, so he decided to practice with him.

“That’s when I got into the accident.” A truck had edged into the oncoming traffic lane as it attempted to veer clear of an illegally-parked trailer in the lane. To avoid an oncoming car, it had ploughed right up onto the sidewalk, hitting Ishizaka,

“It was a pretty bad accident. I ended up quitting high school and coming back here to focus on my treatment.”

Kento waited for Ishizaka’s next words with bated breath.

“I had a few operations, but ultimately the doctor’s verdict was that I should amputate my leg and switch to a prosthetic limb if I wanted it to function at its best.”

Ishizaka sighed and drained the rest of the sake in his cup.

“I was devastated, to be honest. I’d had so much encouragement from everyone in rehabilitation, after all. But I decided to place my best on that prosthetic leg.”

He had also strengthened his resolve not to give up running even after he had lost a leg.

“I thought, if there aren’t any good prosthetic legs out there, I’ll just make one.” So he had taken a university entrance qualification exam and entered the computer engineering department at his local

university.

“He came to visit me in the spring, when he’d just graduated high school. Around the same time of the year as now.”

He had gotten a few letters from Orihara, but had refrained from contacting him back until after he had firmly established his academic path. He also hadn’t mentioned his amputated leg, since he didn’t want to worry Orihara more than necessary.

“And eventually, we drifted out of touch.”

That day, Orihara had visited him out of the blue. He had been shocked to see Ishizaka with a prosthetic leg.

“But I ended up yelling at him,” Ishizaka sighed. “All because when I asked him if he was still running, he said he’d quit long ago.” Ishizaka covered his face with his hands, as if the painful scene were replaying in his mind.

“I said to him, ‘Whose fault do you think it is that I can’t run anymore? You were supposed to run in my place after the accident’.”

But of course, that hadn’t been out of hatred.

“I thought he’d quit running because he felt guilty about what happened to me.” He had thought his words would give the push that Orihara needed to start running again. “I wanted him to run the Hakone Ekiden race.”

That way, he could cheer Orihara on from afar.

“How was I supposed to know that he’d quit so he could study to get into medical school? He’d never even told me.”

Ishizaka cradled his head in his hands. Although Kento felt like he was making things somewhat worse, he told Ishizaka what Orihara was going through at home—including his complicated relationship with his older brother. Ishizaka lifted his face and widened his eyes in surprise.

“I had no idea. So that’s what was happening to him, huh?” He looked up in exasperation at the ceiling and its sooty beams. Now that he thought of it, perhaps Orihara had come to tell Ishizaka that he would become a doctor so he could make his leg better. But after Ishizaka had yelled at him, Orihara had simply left looking dejected, not saying another word. There had been no contact from him since then.

“To think he’d applied for medical school just so he could make me better. I had no idea that was what was going through his mind.”

Ishizaka had not even known that Orihara had become a doctor until Kento told him.

“I sent out letters a few times, you know.” But he had only gotten a simple postcard once from Orihara that said he was doing well.

“He can be pretty stubborn and prone to jumping to conclusions.”

Kento almost burst out laughing because Miyashita had said the

exact same thing. But he could not laugh when he thought of how Orihara must have felt at the time.

He had chosen the path of medicine to make his best friend better, but in turn had undermined his older brother's position. And when he had finally gotten into medical school, his friend had already lost his leg.

Ishizaka knocked back his replenished glass of sake, then looked intently at Kento.

“So, what do you want me to do?”

Kento looked him straight in the eyes.

“I want you to see Yuri.”

One Saturday in April, long after the cherry blossoms had faded, Kento was waiting for Ishizaka on the platform of Tokyo Station. When he saw Ishizaka come running up the stairs, he took off his baseball cap and waved it wildly.

“Hurry up, Mr. Ishizaka! Over here!”

Kento pounced onto the nearest train door and used his body to hold the door open until Ishizaka came tumbling in.

“Man, I think I put more effort into that run than I do for races.” Ishizaka took off his wrinkled suit jacket and dabbed at his sweaty forehead with his handkerchief.

“I thought thirty minutes would be enough to get me here, but it was really crowded at Big Sight. They were doing some kind of comic show or whatever. I couldn’t flag a taxi for the life of me, and the buses were at a standstill. It was hell.”

They checked their seat numbers, sat down, and finally let the tension leave them.

“I’m sorry for making you come out like this,” Kento apologized.

“Don’t mind it. I had errands to run in Tokyo, anyway.”

Ishizaka had come to Tokyo from Kochi for a medical equipment trade show held at the Big Sight venue in the Tokyo Bay area. The two had planned to meet on Saturday afternoon to visit the hospital in Shimizu where Orihara had been dispatched.

Kento put his baseball cap back on, pulled it low over his eyes, and also fished out a pair of sunglasses to put on. Ishizaka gave him a questioning look.

“Aren’t you hot? Why don’t you take that hat off?”

“No, it’s...”

“Oh, right, you’re a celebrity. I totally forgot,” Ishizaka began loudly, then quickly lowered his voice. “Sorry about that. I have a big voice.” As he spoke he pulled a Discman out of his bag. Kento watched as he took a Beatles CD out of it.

“I’m a Beatles fan,” Ishizaka said, winking.

“Wait a minute...”

Kento decided to throw the question out there.

“Mr. Ishizaka, did you ever play guitar with Yuri?”

“Yeah,” Ishizaka nodded. Kento knew his guess was right. These two had shared a connection deeper than that between teammates on the same track team. He remembered Orihara’s somewhat forlorn eyes when he taught Kento the guitar. Although he had felt a little jealous at the time, he had assumed Orihara was just reminiscing about an old

friend he used to play music with.

He said he quit guitar and running at the same time.

Kento reckoned that Orihara must have harboured feelings for Ishizaka that were more than friendship. He gazed at Ishizaka's profile and his pronounced features, a little intimidating but memorable nonetheless.

"I learned how to play the guitar from Yuri. Especially Beatles songs."

"That's great," Ishizaka said, oblivious to Kento's mixed feelings.

"It's nice to see the Beatles' greatness passed onto young'uns like you."

Kento took out a CD from his own backpack to show the man.

"Oh, is this your group's CD?" Ishizaka asked.

"Yup. It's our first album. Will you give it a listen?"

Ishizaka took the CD from Kento and put it into his Discman.

"I wrote the lyrics for 'Sand Glass', you know."

Shortly after, Ishizaka took off his earphones, took out the CD and gave it back to Kento.

"It doesn't really speak to me. I think I prefer the Beatles."

"No need to be so mean," Kento said in exaggerated disappointment. "It's not fair to compare us to the Beatles. We're doing our best, too, you know."

"That you are," Ishizaka gave a booming laugh and lowered his head in apology. "So, what time are we supposed to get there? What time have you promised to meet with Orihara? I'd like to get back within the day, if we can." Ishizaka looked at his watch. Kento didn't know what to say.

"Um... I actually haven't told him that we're coming."

"What? Are you serious? What if we don't get to see him?"

Kento had never thought of that. What if they went to visit Orihara out of the blue, and he turned out to be on a day off from his hospital duties? Kento had been too excited about seeing him to think of backup plans.

"Why haven't you told him we're coming?" Ishizaka's eyes bulged as they looked at him. Kento decided to explain the details.

"I thought he wouldn't want to see us if I mentioned my name." He left out the part where they had had sex in the spur of the moment (though Kento didn't think so), but Kento told him everything else ? about how he loved Orihara, and how Orihara had dismissed it as a childish infatuation.

Ishizaka folded his arms as he listened in, and once Kento finished speaking, he lapsed into thought. After a while, he sighed and glanced sideways at Kento.

"Which means you must be gay."

Kento shook his head. "I'm not sure. All I know is one thing, and

it's that I love Yuri."

Ishizaka hummed in thought. "To me, it seems like Orihara's got the right mindset. But, well, any adult in his right mind would reject your confession, anyway."

When Kento glared at him, Ishizaka waved his hand hastily. "No, that's not what I meant. A year ago, you were still a kid, right? You can't blame him for not taking you seriously. But what's also true is that no one can negate what you're feeling in your heart. This is a problem that you two have to discuss with each other."

Ishizaka carried on, thinking as he spoke.

"I don't know about giving my name, either. He feels guilt towards me. He might pretend he's not there, just like he did to his brother."

"You're right, come to think of it." Kento had thought of using Ishizaka's name when asking to meet with Orihara, but he realized it wasn't such a good idea after all. "What should we do, then?"

"Let's see. We should say we're just classmates from high school and gloss over the names. He might come out to meet us, wondering who we might be."

The feeling of uncertainty still swelled inside Kento as he wondered if Orihara would still agree to listen to their story after meeting face-to-face.

"What if he sees us and gets angry and leaves?" Kento said with a gloomy face. Ishizaka laughed brightly and clapped his shoulder.

"Leave it to me. I have more life experience than you. Though I don't have much to say when it comes to male relationships, if it's between a man and a woman, I've got more experience under my belt. I've played the matchmaker more than a couple of times, you know. I think I can lend a guy a helping hand."

Orihara had been dispatched to a rather large hospital in Shimizu City, with its own emergency center. Kento and Ishizaka put in an appointment at the front desk, claiming the visitor was "Suzuki from Shonan Private School", just like they'd rehearsed. Of course, Suzuki was a fictional persona.

"Kind of like how a spy would sign his name as John Smith," Ishizaka whispered to him.

However, Orihara appeared not to have any suspicions, and immediately answered the internal telephone line after being put through by the receptionist. The sharp-looking woman with short hair spoke a few words into the phone before smiling at the two.

"He's in a meeting right now. Will you have a seat and wait in the lobby?"

The two decided to wait on the lobby sofa as they had been told to

do. Ishizaka watched the receptionist from afar and nudged Kento with his elbow.

“Don’t you feel your heart race when you see a beautiful woman like her?”

“Not at all,” Kento replied promptly. It was the truth. Ishizaka shook his head in exasperation.

“Well, if you really love him, I’m not going to complain, but...”

“Yuri is the only one for me,” Kento said firmly. Ishizaka gave him a sidelong look.

“He did have a pretty face, now that I think about it. Our upperclassmen used to try to make moves on him. I thought they were being stupid,” he reminisced. Kento looked at him sharply as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

Once consultation hours ended, quite past five, the elevator doors opened to let out a crowd of doctors in white coats. One broke away from the group and came to the lobby. It was Orihara.

Orihara saw the two of them and stopped dead in his tracks.

“Hey,” Ishizaka said, getting up from the sofa. For a moment, Orihara almost turned on his heel, but sighed before striding towards them.

“Kento. What in the world is going on?” Orihara looked at him critically. “Ishizaka, what are you doing here with him?”

Ishizaka slid an arm around Kento’s shoulder and drew him close. Orihara’s face tensed for a split second.

“We’re friends now. Kento came to interview me.”

“Interview you?”

“Yeah. It was part of a series on athletes with prosthetic limbs.”

Orihara’s shoulders tensed at the words “prosthetic limbs.” Ishizaka paid no mind to him as he rolled up the right leg of his pants.

“Look at this baby. I made it. I’m aiming to enter the next Paralympic Games.” He then rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt and displayed his muscular arms. “Go on. Touch it.”

Orihara hesitantly touched his arm. His eyes widened in surprise.

“See that? Pretty impressive muscle, huh?” Ishizaka laughed jovially and looked at Orihara from head to toe. “You, on the other hand, were right to stop running. You haven’t grown a bit since high school. Look at how scrawny you are.”

“How rude,” Orihara said with a wry smile.

“I’m only stating the obvious. I train every day. I’m even more serious about it than I was in high school. If I hadn’t lost my leg, I wouldn’t have come this far.”

Suddenly, his tone softened.

“That’s what I’m trying to say. I came to show you me. To show you what I’ve become.” Ishizaka told Orihara the very words which Kento had asked him to say.

“Orihara, I’m no Mother Theresa. I won’t say that I’ve never hated you for this. But right now, I have no grudges.” He grinned and stuck his thumb up. “If I’d led a normal life as an athlete, I might never make the Olympics. I’m proud of my leg.”

“Ishizaka, I?”

“I have a favour to ask of you,” Ishizaka interrupted. “Let go of the baggage you have because of what happened to me. Do it for him.”

Ishizaka grabbed Kento’s arm and pushed him out in front of Orihara.

“You two haven’t seen each other in a while, right? I’m sure you have lots to talk about. I’ll leave him with you.”

He then glanced at his watch and picked up his bag and suit jacket from the sofa.

“The bullet trains will be running for a while still. I’m going home. I have work tomorrow.”

Orihara stood still for a while after seeing Ishizaka off. After a long stretch of time, Orihara sighed and turned back to Kento. He took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes, and put them back on.

“Kento, what about you?”

“I have the day off tomorrow,” Kento managed to reply gloomily. He hadn’t been able to take part in their conversation at all. Even after all these years, the air between Orihara and Ishizaka still implied that they had a strong bond. Kento felt completely dwarfed.

Orihara approached him, oblivious of his diminished spirits.

“Why don’t you stay the night at my place, then?” He then looked up at Kento with an exclamation of surprise. “You’ve gotten so tall!”

“Uh, yeah,” Kento replied.

Orihara lived in a condominium next to the hospital. He invited Kento inside a simple one-bedroom unit with a living/dining room and kitchen. Kento had planned to say so many things once they were alone, but he was so choked up with emotion he had trouble opening his mouth.

“I thought I’d take you to a nice sushi restaurant since you’ve come all the way to Shimizu, but I thought it might cause a commotion if people recognized you,” Orihara apologized as he ordered off a delivery menu. “I’m sorry. Next time, I’ll try to find a restaurant where we can go without you being found out.”

“You don’t have to worry about that.” Kento inwardly gave a wry smile at Orihara’s overly concerned tendencies. He hasn’t changed at

all. He had wondered what he would do if Orihara had changed over the past year.

The apartment was clean but barren-looking. There were no floral-patterned cushions or lace curtains. It looked very much like a man's apartment.

It doesn't seem like he has any girls coming over, but....

Kento also kept a sharp eye out as he inspected the bathroom. There was no extra toothbrush as far as he could tell. Good. That means he hasn't found a new girlfriend. But he was still worried. When Orihara came into the bathroom as he was leaving, he decided to make sure.

"Doctor, are you going out with anyone right now?"

Orihara blushed furiously. "No," he said.

Good, Kento thought.

Once he got out of his bath, Orihara went to the kitchen and came back with a can of beer. He offered one to Kento, but Kento declined, saying he was still underage.

"Oh, right, you're still seventeen. You're so tall, I sometimes forget."

"Stop treating me like a kid," Kento protested as he towed off his freshly-shampooed hair. "I might not be able to drink or smoke yet, but in two weeks I'm turning eighteen. I'll be able to gamble."

Orihara smiled slightly before bringing the beer to his lips. He came to sit down beside Kento on the sofa.

"Thank you," he said. "I can't thank you enough for... what you did. I wanted to see Ishizaka for so long... but I thought I never could. I thought I had no right to."

The care he felt for Ishizaka was evident in his voice, which made Kento feel a prick in his chest.

"Were you in love with Mr. Ishizaka?" Orihara snapped his head up at Kento's slightly sharp tone. He nodded his head almost unnoticeably.

"I could never tell him. I mean, after all, I was the one who..."

Kento hurriedly scooted beside Orihara and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It doesn't matter now," Orihara said. "But the same doesn't go for what I did to you. I left without saying a word." He sighed, taking off his glasses and putting them on the table. "I was... happy when you used to come over to my uncle's house to visit. Before I knew it, I was looking forward to it."

Kento's eyes widened at the unexpected confession. Orihara

continued sheepishly.

“About that night... I was so ashamed that I took advantage of your kindness, and... that’s why I said what I did. And if I stayed there, I knew I would end up relying on you, so I put a stop to it.”

He rubbed his fingertips together as he squeezed the words out painfully.

“I always thought I should never have been born.”

“You’re wrong!”

Orihara choked at Kento’s loud outburst.

“Thank you,” he said. “That’s why I left without saying anything to you. And when I got back to the university’s medical office, I signed up for a relocation. I was trying to distance myself. You hated me for it, didn’t you?”

It had been hard to say goodbye a year ago, but Kento shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter now. I was able to see you again. That’s good enough.”

Orihara lifted his face in surprise and stared at Kento. A blush rose in his cheeks as he averted his eyes.

“You’ve become a lot more mature.”

“You think so?”

Kento slid his hand on Orihara’s shoulder and gently held him closer. Orihara twitched, but didn’t resist.

“Doctor...” Kento whispered as he held Orihara close. “You were wrong.”

“What?” Orihara said in a startled way, looking up in his arms.

“You said I would forget about you, but I never stopped loving you.”

Orihara was looking up at him with a slightly troubled expression. Kento hooked a finger under his chin.

“Will you accept me now?”

When their lips overlapped, Orihara still did not resist.

Orihara walked ahead as he led Kento to the bedroom.

“Doctor, are you sure?” Kento asked while he took Orihara’s pajamas off. “I don’t want you to say that it’s a mistake again.”

Orihara flushed and shook his head. Once they were naked and on top of each other, Orihara’s body seemed so fragile in comparison to his own body, which had grown a lot over their time apart. Kento hesitated for a moment. I have to make sure it doesn’t hurt.

He lay down on his side facing Orihara so he wouldn’t put any weight on the other man.

“Hold onto me,” he said, as he wound Orihara’s arms around his

neck. He held the man close as they both lay on their sides, and lifted one of Orihara's legs so that he was straddling Kento's leg, and entered him that way. Orihara gasped a little from the tight squeeze, but eventually loosened up as he grew accustomed.

It had been a year since their last time in bed, but for Kento, the feeling of being inside Orihara was exactly as he'd remembered it. He hasn't changed at all. He's warm, soft, and gentle. Orihara filled him with so much pleasure, so much happiness.

"Doctor, I love you... I've always loved you," he whispered to the man who desperately clung to him. Orihara's face was buried in Kento's neck, but he nodded in response.

Kento let go of the leg he was hoisting up and reached down to Orihara's lower regions and stroked him. Ragged breaths burst at his ear, just as they had that night. The breaths turned to sweet moans and were sucked into his own feverish heat.

As their intimacy reached its peak, the man's slender arms tightened around Kento's neck.

"Doctor..."

Orihara let out a short cry as his soft body bucked. Kento held him tightly. After climaxing, Orihara's strength left his body and he was no longer able to hold onto Kento. Kento laid Orihara down on the sheets and decided to make love to him face-to-face this time.

"I can see you better like this," he whispered. "Doctor, you're beautiful."

Orihara hid his face from embarrassment.

"No, don't do that. Show me your face," Kento said, gently prying his hands away. "I missed you. I wanted to see your face. You were all I was thinking about."

As he slowly and reluctantly detached his body from Orihara's, Kento gently took him back into his arms. He brushed up the man's damp hair and kissed his sweating forehead.

"Doctor, did you sleep with me as a way to say thanks?" he asked.

"No, I didn't," Orihara said, looking up at Kento with reddened cheeks.

"Oh. Good." Relieved, Kento buried his face in Orihara's hair. "Did you see me on TV?"

Orihara nodded silently. After a pause, he began to speak in a low voice.

"I was... happy that you debuted. I watched as much of you as I

could... though I was busy with work and I couldn't always. But I recorded the shows so I could watch them later."

"Really? So did you watch that episode of Music Map?"

Orihara nodded.

"Did you get the message that I love you?"

Orihara blushed again, but nodded and continued to speak.

"I was filled with so much happiness to see you singing and dancing again."

Kento ran his fingers through Orihara's soft hair. "Does that mean I was the one to bring you happiness?"

"Yes."

It was everything Kento had wished for. Satisfied, he buried his face in Orihara's hair again. He decided to take a leap of faith with his next question.

"Hey, Doctor, do you love me?" he asked.

There was a brief silence, after which came his answer in a dubious voice.

"I think so."

"Honest. That's just like you, Doctor," Kento chuckled as he stole Orihara's lips again. 'I think so' was enough. His biggest wish had already come true ? to bring happiness to the person he loved most. Now, they had all the time in the world to spend together. He would take his time to make the man fall in love with him.

Kento sighed in contentment as he released Orihara from their kiss. He felt like his whole body had been filled to the brim with something hot and sweet. He laid a finger on Orihara's chin and turned his face towards him, and gazed at his beloved's face.

"There's a song I wrote ? will you listen to it together with me? I thought of you when I was writing the lyrics."

Orihara slowly opened his eyes and tilted his head. "You wrote a song?"

"Yeah. I wrote the lyrics to one of the songs in our first album. I'm kind of like Paul or John, don't you think?"

Kento crawled out of bed and went to grab his backpack. He pulled out a Chronos CD and showed it to him.

"See? It's this song ? 'Sand Glass'."

"Did you really write the lyrics?"

Orihara looked astonished, which made Kento feel a little proud. He sat down on the bed and cupped Orihara's face with his hands.

"Yeah. I wrote it with all my love," he whispered, as he bent forward to kiss him.

I wrote it to send it to you.